

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES THAT
HINDER SUSTAINABLE
CHURCH GROWTH

Brian R. Thompson Sr.

BA, Saint Augustine College, 1991
MDiv, United Theological Seminary, 2016

Mentors

J. Elvin Sadler, DMin
Willie Marshall, DMin

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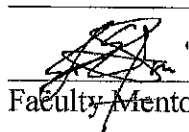
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Mentors

J. Elvin Sadler, DMin
Willie Marshall, DMin

Date: 4/30/2020

Approved:


Faculty Mentor:

Associate Dean of Doctoral Studies:

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ABSTRACT

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The problem experienced by Fayetteville area churches is that leaders felt stifled because of the uncertainty of how to overcome their personal obstacles and adversities.

Qualitative methods of evaluation were pre- and post-surveys, discussion questions through participant observations, and pastoral and ministerial questionnaires. The results were that a greater awareness of overcoming obstacles was achieved by the majority of participants. If and when leaders follow the methods of teachings within this project and share the knowledge with their members, they will create a greater awareness of how to overcome obstacles in order to gain and maintain sustainable church growth.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the pastors who consented to participate in this project – you made the implementation possible. I especially appreciate the congregation of Simon Temple African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church who continue to support my endeavors toward kingdom building. A very special thank you to my family – my wife, Felica, and children, Alexis and Brian II – who love and encourage me in and through all things.

DEDICATION

This research is dedicated to all those people that counted me out, yet not realizing that they pushed me to my destiny.

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INTRODUCTION

There are always issues that arise within congregations related to church growth, acceptance, transformation, faith, and spiritual maturity. This project will be used to illustrate how to overcome obstacles that hinder church growth.

Biblical, historical, theological, and interdisciplinary perspectives were used to support the project. The integration of these concepts was the foundational research for the project as well as centering the project goals as a means of further validating the project.

Before growth, particularly sustainable growth, can be realized transformation must take place. It is my belief that the primary principle that guides the mission of transformation centers on faith and endurance. The biblical foundation chapter focused on the Old Testament scripture, Genesis 37:23-46. The scripture tells the story of Joseph and identified the obstacles of jealousy, envy, deceit, and abandonment he encountered at the hands of his brothers prior to experiencing redemption and fulfilling his intended purpose. The passage speaks to the power of faith manifested because of transformation. Joseph was blessed, but persecuted. His brothers were flawed, but ultimately evolved and became repentant. Joseph overcame his trials because he remained connected to God. His spirit was in line and in tune with his God-given purpose. With regard to salvation, Joseph's came through direct revelation from God, it was his gift of dream interpretations that allowed him to prosper.

As it is with Joseph's experiences, pastors go through adversities of their own whereby they battle with internal and external struggles that impact spiritual development of themselves and their members. The impact of one's personal life can greatly affect the ministry work of their congregation. Living a life embattled with contradictory actions to the word of God can easily spill over into your work in the church. The two go hand and hand. Most people's metrics of a pastor's effect on the congregations is how you live your domestic life and personal life. Paul in his explanation of pastoral work states, "An overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, and able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?" (1 Tim. 3:2-5). A pastor can never say, "Do as I say but do not do as I do." We must like Paul say, "Be imitators of me" (1 Cor. 4:16, 11:1). Therefore, this validates the importance of a pastor living a life of repentance and the importance of keeping in right relations with Christ that they live a life worthy of the calling of Christ.

The historical research focused on the life of social reformer, abolitionist, writer, and political leader Fredrick Douglass. Fredrick Douglass was presented as one who helped to enhance the lives of African Americans through his effort to eradicate slavery. Douglass is an essential figure to study, not only because of his political and historical contributions, but also because of his status as a religious figure. During his time, America was operating as a nation in search of independence. It was a land viewed by many as a place where faith and hard work would guarantee that an individual prospered

free of ridicule. He was alive during a time when America was involved in a major cultural shift; a time when African American religious leaders were leading the effort to free slaves. Douglass' message of blanket tolerance provided a new perspective of perseverance, economic empowerment and cultural identity that was otherwise not being addressed in a comprehensive manner. Viewing the life and struggles of Fredrick Douglass is an exemplar for letting pastors and ministers know that obstacles can be overcome.

Liberation theology was critical to deriving answers and solutions to addressing bringing an awareness to obstacles that hinder and maintain sustaining church growth. Liberation theology emphasizes social concerns for the poor and political liberation for the oppressed. In this project, liberation theology examines the frustrations of the pastor with the lack of uncertainty of how to overcome their personal obstacles and adversities. The teaching of this studies offered them a sense of freedom through the awareness and the knowledge gained by overcoming your obstacles. As mentioned, a major tenet of the liberation theory focuses on oppression. While the pastors felt stifled in the efforts to move forward it led to an oppression of the congregation.

The theoretical focus of this project examined churches that were declining in church growth. These churches ascertained that when you examine the root causes of your lack of church growth, when you except and acknowledge those issues, your church can grow. These churches efforts to try out of the box things, moving beyond their comfort zones (some in radical ways), experienced growth while meeting the needs of the people.

The interdisciplinary focus of this project examined the inability to allow changing times and techniques to sustain healthy and sustainable church growth. It requires pastors and ministers to keep a focus on the members and what is going on in the pews. They must be attentive to the changing times of technology, meeting needs of the people and how this impacts church growth.

In conclusion, this project's foundational research offered insight to better understanding how the awareness of obstacles can hinder church growth as well as bring about a need to remove those obstacles to invoke change. My passion for pursuing this project developed out of my own personal experiences of recognizing and overcoming obstacles that hindered my church from growing. The project sought to work with pastors to gain a better understanding of how the teachings I shared with the participants created an awareness of how to sustain church growth.

CHAPTER ONE

MINISTRY FOCUS

The primary reason for writing this chapter is to provide the backstory and lay out the analysis for the development of the hypothesis in which to build my Doctor of Ministry project. While developing this hypothesis, I will consider how my interests and skills in ministry can form a foundation for the doctoral project. This synergy chapter will reveal the problem and give details of how the Lord allowed me to help my people. It has not been an easy road but praise the Lord, a successful one. There were times when I would second guess myself on a few things, but God allowed me to continue the course that was set before me.

In 2001, I was assigned the pastorate of Simon Temple African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Zion Church and in eight years the membership grew from 400 to 3000. Simon Temple was now a mega church. One might hear that statement and say, “How wonderful.” My spiritual journey was far from wonderful. It was not an easy journey at all.

I grew up in a God-fearing home with loving and hardworking parents. “Big Daddy,” my mother’s grandfather served as the patriarch of our family. He was the voice of wisdom for our entire community. He was a Baptist deacon and a hymnologist who had mastered the art of folk music and long meter hymns. We spent most of our evenings outside on the porch singing hymns and reading the Bible. I recall that as a young child,

we all gathered to enjoy one another's company and to experience the many mysteries of the gospel on that front porch. Many people called me an old spirit or an old soul. It seems my knowledge of things outdated the years I had lived on this earth. I credit that knowledge to my parents making sure that I was exposed to the word of God early in life. We spent time serving the Lord – choir, usher, and Sunday school. It was a part of my responsibility in service. We were in church every Wednesday night and two or three times on Sunday, so I have never not known of the Lord.

However, a pivotal point in my spiritual experience took place during my senior year of high school. I was popular in school. I had always been an overachiever in everything except my academics and because of the gift of gab, I could talk my way through anything (or so I thought). One day, I was called into the principals' office right after basketball season had ended and told that I would not graduate because I was short two credit hours. I was completely devastated. I could not fathom the idea of not graduating. Aside from that, I felt that I had been used and was being thrown away. For the first time in my life I felt as if I wanted to just die. I contemplated suicide and went into complete isolation. I dropped out of high school two months prior to my classmates' graduation. For many, isolation may not be such a bad thing, but for someone who felt the need to be the voice of the crowd, isolation can feel like a death sentence. Isolation was killing me. The night before I was supposed to graduate, I got into a confrontation with a group of white males who pulled me out of my car, beat me, and violated me in ways I could never have imagined. This experience gave me a partial reality check as I knew that I was not invincible. I still did not make the best choices in life. Due to the violence and invasion of this incident, I carried a gun with me most of the time.

Somehow, I was able to pick up the pieces and mend from the disappointment of not graduating high school and two months later obtained my GED and went on to college.

Receiving the news of not being eligible for graduation resulted in some dark days. I was not only saddened by it, as I stated, I also felt left aside. I was left alone to decide whether to “fake it or make it.” I knew that I had too much in me spiritually to not win academically. Yes, the devil showed up and reared his ugly head, he tried hard to trip me up! I was outside of the will of God, but He was merciful and picked me up!

I believe that my feelings of inferiority and inadequacy resulted from thinking that I was never smart enough. After all, I had dropped out of high school. I had to attend special education classes in middle school (riding the short bus, literally). It was quite embarrassing to be in the twelfth grade and still in Algebra One because I could not pass math. While I could talk to anybody and say anything and talk my way out of a bad situation, I constantly struggled with feeling I was not smart enough. I carried the baggage of inferiority and inadequacy from those formative years well into adulthood. It all stemmed from the cruelty and embarrassment I felt as the one who could not get it right. I had a couple of friends who would hang with me, but I could not get my academics together. I could play basketball and was talented, but I just struggled academically. This experience scarred me deeply because I questioned, “Why am I like this?” “Why do I feel like everybody gets it but me?” That is a horrible feeling for a young person to have and a bad place for a young person to exist in.

I had much adversity in my life, and I know I have myself to blame. Things did bother me. I was concerned. I wondered more about myself, my life and my spiritual walk. How could all of this happen when I was so used to using my mouth to get out of

situations? All my swelling words had shrunk to nothing; they had come to a silent halt. God was using things to draw me to himself and I ignored them.

When I entered college, I swore I would not go to church on Sundays. However, God had a completely different plan for my life. There was a constant pull on my life that I fought and resisted for a very long time. God was always telling me things I did not necessarily want to believe at the time. While in college, I joined a fraternity which was something I always aspired to do. I remember nights when my fraternity brothers and I would party hard and wake the next morning reeking of alcohol from the night before. No matter how hard we partied, I still got up on Sunday mornings and went to church. I felt at the time that church was not something that I had to do, but there were even stronger feelings that dealt specifically with my connection to God.

One night during my senior year of college, I attended a party on the campus of Duke University with my fraternity brothers. The spirit of God had already told me not to attend this party, but against God's will, I went anyway. My fraternity brothers and I got into a brawl with the Omegas. I found myself in a really bad situation that could have cost me my life. A member of the other fraternity pulled a gun and pointed it at me. I pulled my gun and pointed it at his head. We both pulled the trigger and neither gun went off. We ended up walking away from each other. I shot my gun in the air, and it went off. The other guy shot his gun and it went off. That is when I knew without a shadow of a doubt that God had work for me to do on this earth. I was scared to death, not of dying, but of the call on my life.

During college, God revealed things to me through dreams and visions. I would have visions of people who were going to die, and it would come to pass. With that,

whenever trouble was upon me or I was faced with danger, God manifested in bodily form and warned me. I would stay away and then receive news that someone at a place God had forbidden me to go had died, been arrested or met with some other misfortune. There was always some travesty that God was protecting me from.

I saw God ordering my footsteps toward ministry though I had no desire to be a minister, a preacher, a pastor, or a teacher. While I would call myself religious, I was not necessarily highly spiritual. Even so, I continued to feel a yearning that was indescribable. Being a pastor conflicted with my desire to do the things that I was used to doing and with the things I desired to do in the world. So, a lot of the times, God was guiding me, and I had no idea He was guiding me through many failures in life. A lot of the failures in life have allowed me to be where I am now and that is hard to fathom because I had to fail that much to be able to gain some sense of victory. The hardest thing for me was waiting on God to reveal where He was taking me and what exactly He was doing through me. I think that is the thing that brought me such restlessness; restlessness with me warring with my flesh in the spirit – not knowing which way I was going. For a long time, I dealt with issues of doubting God's direction of guidance, even though favor was still on my life; and I say favor because things were still happening for me. Things were still going positive for me. I rebounded well after the failures and I knew God's hand was on me, but I could not figure out why. I could not get to what I thought should have been my destination or my expected end; and it bothered me. In turn, I dealt with a lot of issues especially from 1991 to 1993 on what God's design and will was for my life. I battled a lot of depression at that time, when I did not know the meaning of depression.

It was helpful for me, but at the same time it disturbed me so much; that I thought something was wrong with me.

In 1991, as I continued to go out nightly and come in a 3:00 a.m. or 4:00 a.m., usually drunk, I would get up at 7:00 a.m. to go to church. As I got ready, I would find myself preaching in the shower and in the car as I drove to church. It was a constant spiritual struggle for me. I could not figure out why I had this burning desire to preach. At one point, I thought maybe it was just me wanting to, in some way, validate or compensate for all the mess that I was doing and desired to do. Eventually, I realized it was not me and my desire, it was a spiritual war going on within me. For about two years, it was the thing that consumed my mind. God was merciful; He protected me even as He allowed me to continue to do what I desired. I know that is God's permissive will, but God had a plan. It was difficult for me. Preaching was not something that I desired to do, or that I wanted to do, or that I went after, so it was something very strange to me to be called. How and why would God call me? I felt so unworthy, I would even dare to say that the day I preached my trial sermon, I do not know if I was fully converted. As shameful as it sounds, I do not believe I was fully converted. I believe that I had a form of godliness but denied the power thereof, and God still allowed me to preach. People got saved, and wonderful, miraculous things happened. About a year after that, I believe that I really gained true relationship with Jesus Christ and was fully converted. I have often struggled with that wondering is there somehow some illegitimacy within my calling or preaching that had to be legitimized by God at some point in my life?

It was after that year that God let me know, "I can do this with you or without you, but I want to do it with you." I truly believe that I was chosen, I just do not know

why. I have no earthly idea why God would use me and do so many successful things through the ministry when I was not faithful. The reality of my situation is why I have such a heart and passion for people who are not necessarily supposed to be in Christ, or where they are supposed to be in their relationship with God. My form of godliness was that I knew the same repetitions, I knew what to do, what to say, and when to say it, but I was no righter than the man on the street who did not know the Lord. There was a form of being right with God. I knew the literacy of being right with God and the practices, but my heart was not with God. This reality still bothers me today because as Paul says, "When I would do good, evil is always present." It is a warfare. Now, in reflection, I know I am saved; I know I am doing God's will.

The Lord will often allow us to go through devastating and embarrassing situations just so that He can prove that He is able to deliver. There are times when God calls us to ministry and without knowing all the details, delays, devastations, and downfalls, we accept God's offer just to make peace with God and ourselves. Perhaps, you have been in similar situations where you were called to a special task without knowing the full story, but you leaned on the word of God. There were certainly some devastating and embarrassing situations in my life; inferiority, inadequacy, and unworthiness were my struggles and obstacles, but God kept me for God's purpose; that I might do His will.

As the senior pastor of Simon Temple A.M.E. Zion Church, it is my observation that our church struggled with internal and external spiritual development. There was a lack of understanding faith and its role in shaping the path of one's calling, duties and

responsibilities. There was also a disconnect on the process shifting these spiritual goals and operating consistently in a heightened state of transformation.

The congregation did not fully grasp the fact that in order to walk in one's path with God, there must be a sense of spiritual understanding. A vital part of this understanding involves leadership, destiny, worship and culture within the congregation. As the senior pastor of a mega church, I had to acknowledge some very ugly truths about my congregation.

I had been blessed to inherit a situation that God had entrusted me to deal with and follow His lead for the answers. I knew that theologies of congregations were both implicit and explicit. I was also aware that cultural change effects and impacts theologies about, faith, purpose and strategic growth. Understanding must be the foundation on which faith is built. This became my challenge for the congregation of Simon Temple Church, its members and those that served as pastoral staff. This was a congregation of traditionally older adults with tight family connections.

Simon Temple A.M.E. Zion Church, formally known as Beaver Creek A.M.E. Zion Church was over 146 years old at the time that I took over as pastor in 2001. Simon Temple was a very traditional A.M.E. Zion Church with limited music or outreach to millennials. It was a strong church with dedicated and faithful people but lacked possibility for sustained growth. The median age was sixty years old for this congregation in 2001, which most of the persons in the church had children and grandchildren that grew up in the church. As their grandchildren became of age, they chose to attend neighboring churches that were more conducive for millennials and young couples.

When I began my pastoral assignment in 2001, there were approximately 300 persons on the role with approximately 150 to 175 attending the early morning worship and the 11:00 a.m. worship services. It was my desire for Simon Temple's membership to grow, especially since it was in close proximity of the military base at Fort Bragg, which is located four blocks from the church. With the constant influx of soldiers in the community, it was a goal to be able to capitalize on the influx of soldiers on a consistent basis knowing that many of them would deploy or PCS (Permanent Change of Station) on a regular basis. Our goal was to be able to attract the soldiers, keep them if we could and use them to attract other soldiers for sustainability. They would become access to the community through ministries, social justice, youth and youth ministries. They would become productive from spiritual growth and a great help to the ministry for a period. One of the main issues that we ran into while trying to make the transition was the desire for long-time members to stay in the spirit of traditionalism and their reluctance to change into a progressive ministry that would attract a new crowd.

I not only had to convince the current congregants of the vision and God-given dream to grow the church, but I also had to attract, maintain and sustain the many visitors that came weekly. They needed to see that this was not the same church that they had passed by for years. It was my mission to make sure that they remained faithful while making a spiritual mental shift. The desired goal was to mentally transform the current congregation so that the new and the old would worship harmoniously as we survived the shift of growth!

We started with several components of ministry music, young adults and helping those that dealt with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). We also focused on a

Military Ministry that would help the families to build and grow spiritually, which included those that were band members of the military community. I found this to be quite difficult, but the cost of change is always hard. From 2001 to 2005, the church grew from about 300 to 1000 members, from 2000 to 2008 the church grew to over 2000 members. This growth caused us to be able to make plans to build while renovating our sanctuary from 400 to 700 seats. The church shifted to three services to accommodate the new members and the visitors constantly each Sunday.

In 2008, I was forced to go full-time in the ministry. I could no longer serve as a bi-vocational pastor and effectively handle the call of the ministry. We made plans to build a 1600 seat sanctuary in 2008. The building process began in 2012, and in 2014 we moved into our new building. We had over 3000 members with at least a hundred visitors per Sunday, we thank the Lord! There were “pains” that came with growth which caused frictions within the church. Many used words on a changing church such as, “We’ve never did it this way before.”

We found that ministries were able to speak to and nurture the people that worshiped with us was very important. The church transitioned from twelve ministries to over fifty active ministries that impacted not only the local church but the community as well. These ministries helped to sustain the growth and keep persons faithfully within the church.

Simon Temple is a 146-year-old church born out of a poor people but worked hard to be able to be known as the Beaver Creek A.M.E. Zion Church. After many years becoming the Simon Temple A.M.E. Zion Church, these persons came from many walks of life. Many of them were active military and some retired veterans, teachers and blue-

collar workers. These faithful Christians were a part of the oldest A.M.E. Zion Church in the Cumberland County, Fayetteville, North Carolina community. The church was birthed from a largely traditional A.M.E. Zion Church and congregation who had a desire to be able to grow beyond the realms of traditionalism and enhance the ministry of Methodism within the local church.

My work as a pastor was often cut out for me, even with the vision and the dream of how the Lord wanted me to do things. I had to be cautious. So many things were transforming all at once, while the bigger picture was to sustain members and visitors and bring them to place of united worship. I had a great support team and I made sure that those that we involved were always informed of the task at hand. One great thing about this journey was that it kept me as a pastor close to God and listening for His voice as I proceeded.

The mission was coming along great at a fast pace at times, I would spend time reflecting on the years when the Lord was calling me into the ministry. I would think to myself, "Lord how did I get here," although I knew it was because He had his hands on me. Although I was no longer working a secular job, the ministry was waiting on those hours of my day to be replaced as a full-time minister.

Being a husband, father and pastor was indeed a role to fulfill. My family is very important to me because we are a close-knit family. It was not a problem to share in the ministry as a family. That is most rewarding, and I thank God because that does not happen for all pastors.

I did not have the strain of having to balance my home and church; although I was careful to keep a family balance by spending the necessary time with them. The very

thought of the word obstacles could be very overwhelming. Paul in his writings did remind us that offenses must come. Dealing with older persons that are stuck in their ways can become mentally consuming.

I spent a great amount of time preaching messages that would prepare the hearts of the people for change. Change that was needful and necessary for sustainable growth. It sometimes seemed as though it was 146 years of traditionalism that I was trying not to erase but reinvent. Although these older members were not that old, they were trying to hold on and live out the generations upon generations of “This is how we do it and this is how we want it to remain.”

I spent some days restarting myself spiritually and mentally. I was aware that building projects to this magnitude would be challenging at times. There will always be the praying crowd, the saying crowd and of course the swaying crowd. I held my head up because although the challenges were before me; the Lord was with me. I saw the long-term goal when no one else could see it. I knew that “Better Days Were Coming!” I knew that obstacles were a part of life and a huge part of ministry. The song “We Are Marching Upward to Zion” often felt relevant during those days.

Building a great work was a part of the vision that I kept on my mind. There were times when I pulled up to my office, I felt the assurance and the presence of God. My time alone with God was different from any time of my life. I knew that some decisions would have to be made that only He alone would have the answers for me. I was not trying to be perfect, but I did always want God’s perfect hands touching my heart and leading me.

I was reminded of what Jesus told Peter, “Upon this Rock I build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt.16:18), Things were slowly coming together at times and then others it seemed as though it moved swiftly! The messages were conditioning and changing the mindset of those that needed it. As a pastor, it is always encouraging to see change. Sometimes it is like being a fireman, when one spot of fire is put out, there comes another blaze. Keeping a positive mind and a sense of humor was important to me. No matter what we are endeavoring to do, maintaining a positive attitude and an uplifted spirit is especially important.

Like many churches, Simon Temple is steeped in tradition and some older members were very reluctant to try new ways of doing ministry. They were comfortable with what they knew and wanted to hang on to what was familiar. Many wanted to hold on to and live out generation upon generation of “This is how we do it and this is how we want it to remain.” One challenge was getting congregants, particularly older congregants to try new ways of engaging ministries.

Church mentality is a state of mind or characteristic thinking that implies that we can do much to impress God with good works. It is the mindset that you can earn a place in heaven. Spiritual (Kingdom) mentality says that we need to rest on the finished works of Christ by faith. A series of sermons was preached, and Bible studies taught to enlighten and encourage a change in the mindset of congregants which reflected a spiritual mentality.

Today, Church is more of membership than discipleship. Jesus never advocated membership but rather commanded the Church to go and make disciples. Discipleship is the mandate relevant to the Church. A member is a person who belongs to and

participates in a particular group by choice, while a disciple is a person who believes in and follows the teaching of the leader; and Jesus Christ is our leader. While discipleship and church membership are not mutually exclusive, they both denote two distinct experiences. Church membership denotes a sense of community and belonging, but discipleship communicates a sense of mission and purpose. Membership is joining in. Discipleship is reaching out. Simon Temple had gotten caught up in membership. It appeared that they were simply joining in and not reaching out. Ministries were established that focused on reaching out. Once we moved from simply being members of a church to disciples of Jesus Christ, small groups were established to further nurture and mature these disciples for the purpose of joining God's mission.

The congregation grew to a very diverse group of people from all walks and stations of life. Many of them had never been a part of an organized church and did not necessarily know or understand the biblical principles of giving. Tithing was taught, practiced and demonstrated by the leadership.

The Simon Temple A.M.E. Zion Church membership was challenged to: 1.) move beyond traditions in order to experience progress; 2.) change her mindset from church mentality to spiritual mentality; 3.) move from membership to discipleship; 4.) establish and implement small groups ministry; and 5.) become a tithing church.

As a result of meeting those challenges Simon Temple experienced phenomenal growth – growth that has been sustained. As I engaged in daily conversations, workshops, and conferences, I became aware of the concerns and frustrations of colleagues. I concluded that the problems experienced by Fayetteville area churches is the leaders felt stifled because of the uncertainty of how to overcome their personal obstacles and

adversities. Due to the growth experienced and the principles implemented, I felt that the congregation at Simon Temple could be an inspiration to other churches facing obstacles and struggling to maintain and sustain church growth.

Context

The project consisted of twenty-one participants from the Fayetteville, North Carolina area in Cumberland County and from the Raleigh Triangle Research Park area. Eighteen of the twenty-one participants were used to gather the background information. The background information was used to develop the curriculum for the six focus training sessions. The background information also helped to determine the participants in the six sessions. Three persons participated in the six focus training sessions, one of the three had also participated in the larger group of eighteen.

Data collected from the eighteen pastors came from pre and post surveys and from their participation during the four-hour training session, which I will refer to as the 'One Day Intensive Session.' The three participants who participated in the focus group discussion were from the Research Triangle Area which is in close proximity of Cumberland County. Aside from location, the context of church denomination was considered for this project. Nineteen participants were a part of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion denomination with itinerant appointments, and the other two from different denominations. One was a part of Baptist denomination, and the other was a part of nondenominational context.

The demographic data of the eighteen churches are as such: five of the churches would be considered city churches; four urban; and nine churches would be considered

rural. The size of the churches was: one large church with 301-500 members; four medium churches with 151-300 members; and thirteen small churches with zero to 150 members. Of the churches in the case study, one was rural, one was urban and the other was located in the city. This is significant because it speaks to the accessibility of resources. The ages of the eighteen are as follows: eight of them were sixty to sixty-nine years old; eight were fifty to fifty-nine years old; and two were thirty to fifty years old. Many of the pastors were bi-vocational and seven were full time ministers. The three pastors in the case study median age was fifty-six years old with one full time pastor and two bi-vocational pastors. While all twenty-one churches participated in the surveys and questionnaires only three of the churches participated in the case study. The denominational affiliations were: one Baptist; one was nondenominational; and one Methodist; and are representative of the eighteen. The churches' age range is twenty to eighty-six years old and the membership range from fifty to 1200 members. The two males and one female pastor averaged fifty-nine years of age. Their combined pastoral experience is sixty-five years. One of the pastors started the church and has been the pastor for its entire forty years of existence, one pastor has twenty years of pastoral experience (nine years at the current charge) and the other five years (two years at the current charge). Each of the pastors are college graduates, one with a Master of Divinity degree. One pastor serves full-time while the other two pastors are bi-vocational. Two of the congregations are predominately African American and the other is multi-racial.

All over America there are beautiful edifices that have only lasting memories of how they customarily operate and function. Somehow the fervor and zeal for God they once had has now faded into the distant. There are no longer babies crying or the pitter

patter of tiny children's feet running through halls of the church. The ministries have become outdated and antiquated. The following questions needed to be addressed:

Where have the people gone? Where are they going? Why did they leave? Will they come back? Are they interested in coming at all? If and when leaders follow the methods of the teachings of this project and share knowledge with their members, they will create a greater awareness of how to overcome obstacles in order to gain and maintain sustainable church growth.

CHAPTER TWO

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

As the senior pastor of a large congregation, there are always potential opportunities that arise within the congregation. Whether these opportunities are related to growth, acceptance, transformation, faith, and spiritual maturity, as to be expected in a diverse environment, every solution will not work for all members, all the time. The significance of addressing various obstacles in a manner that is relatable and relevant to all. There is an opportunity to personally tailor the ministry around developmental growth in terms of spiritual formation and overcoming obstacles that prevent a pathway towards transformation. Addressing the various needs of a congregation from a holistic approach can be a challenge; however, it is important to focus on the members and the purpose of one's individual assignment and the church's overall vision. The challenge of leading a congregation is often grounded in understanding what the congregation needs, and then understanding how to fulfill that need. This is an effort that goes beyond just having a great worship service or an amazing choir, and powerful preaching. True leadership is about being a willing vessel to travel across uncharted territories.

The primary principle that has guided the mission of that transformation for my congregation has centered on faith and endurance. In light of this, the scripture relevant to the context of this chapter is the Old Testament passage Genesis 37:23-36. This scriptural text was chosen because it speaks to themes of transformation and overcoming. In the

journey of life, there will always be obstacles, trials, and tribulations that are designed to propel one forward while seemingly on the surface, the very things that are meant for harm most often work together for the glory of God in the end. Genesis 37:23-36 reads, “So it came to pass, when Joseph had come to his brothers, that they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the tunic of many colors that was on him. Then they took him and cast him into a pit. And the pit was empty; there was no waster in it.”¹

Many scholars have given attention to the narrative of Joseph and his rise to power.² The story also gives insight into certain barriers to the growth of a local church, as well as the characteristics of the leader that can help them to overcome such barriers. Walter Brueggemann establishes the various categories of texts found in the Old Testament. The text in Genesis chapter thirty-seven is a narrative which serves as a classic example of how one can dream big and overcome obstacles amid dysfunction. This story is filled with raw passion and trickery, political conniving and sibling rivalry, love and hate, jealousy, lust, ambition, courage and cowardice, judgement, and grace. In some aspect of the story, Joseph is the hero, but God is the lead actor. Through the twist and turns of Joseph’s disastrous story, one witnesses opportunities for God to advance his purposes. If ever we need reassurance about what faith looks like during obstacles, Joseph’s story provides the evidence and the encouragement. It also shows the cost of having and sharing a dream with those whom one may assume as supportive, and yet the subsequent actions show otherwise.

¹ Biblical citations are from the New King James Version unless otherwise noted, Genesis 37:23-36.

² W. Vogels, “Book Review of Joseph, Wise and Otherwise: The Intersection of Wisdom and Covenant in Genesis,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 68, no. 49 (2006): 37-50.

At the start of the passage, we are told that Joseph is hated by his brothers because their father, Jacob, favored Joseph over the others (Gen. 37:4). Let's explore the possibilities of why Joseph's brothers hated him. Verses two through three indicate that Joseph was born in Jacob's "old age." As a result, perhaps Jacob saw Joseph as God's blessing to him. A blessing that came from his wife Rachel who was barren. Secondly, because Joseph was a dreamer, Joseph had dreams that revealed God's plans. In the revelation of the dreams, Jacob believed that God determined Joseph as a great leader. Their father's elevated love was further solidified when he gave Joseph the tunic of many colors (Gen. 37:2). For the brothers, when Joseph wore the gifted coat, it served as a continued reminder of how much greater their father's favor and love was for their youngest brother.³ Examination of the familial relationships reveal another possible reason for Joseph being favored. He was the firstborn of Rachel, the woman whom Jacob originally wanted as a wife (Gen 29:18). The relationship between Joseph and his elder brothers is tense from the beginning.⁴

Towards the end of chapter thirty-five, the sons of Jacob are listed, organized by their maternal lineage. This provides additional insight into the pretext of the relationship between Joseph and his brothers. Leah first conceived Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah (Gen. 29:31-35). Rachel then becomes jealous of Leah and out of frustration gives her servant, Bilhah, to Jacob to bear children. Bilhah gives birth to Dan and Naphtali. When Leah's childbearing season ended, she granted Jacob to her servant Zilpah, who bore Gad

³ Michael Rydelnik and Michael G. Vanlaningham, *The Moody Bible Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2014), 98-99.

⁴ E. Frahn, "And His Brothers Were Jealous of Him: Surprising Parallels between Joseph and King Esarhaddon of Assyria," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 42, no. 3 (2016).

and Asher. Leah becomes the mother of Issachar and Zebulun. Of all the women, Rachel is the last one to bear children, giving birth to Joseph and Benjamin.

Two themes dominate this story when dealing with obstacles: the power of family and the power of dreams. Families provide a powerful influence on our lives and for the most part, it determines how we govern ourselves in society. Families provide the nurturing and guidance to be productive citizens. However, in Joseph's story, his family's blueprint can be viewed as an obstacle in preventing him from fulfilling God's plan for his people.

The patriarchal families of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob make this plain. Abraham (Abram), the father of faith, marries Sarah (Sarai) who is barren. Sarah yearns for children and in desperation, talks Abraham into bearing a son with her Egyptian maidservant, Hagar. Once Hagar is with-child, Hagar and Sarah's relationship is engulfed into conflict, centered on envy and jealousy. When Sarah gets pregnant and Isaac is born, the family conflict is heightened and this causes the expulsion of Hagar and her son, Ishmael.

This expulsion caused family strife which is multiplied through generations. Isaac marries Rebekah in a marriage arranged by his dad, Abraham. Isaac and Rebekah have twin boys, Jacob, who will become Joseph's dad; and Esau, who is the hunter and outdoors man who is his father's favorite. Rebekah favors Jacob and through deception Jacob gets a blessing that Isaac had prepared for Esau. The blessing causes resentment between the brothers and Esau made plans to kill Jacob. This family's dynamic reveals how favoritism and unfair treatment along with jealousy and resentment can be an issue resulting in division which becomes inherent in the family culture. According to author

Andy Couch, “for better or for worse, culture is more than ethnic identity, a collection of practices, beliefs and stories.”⁵

Further investigation into the family structure assists in understanding the context from which the brotherly relationships (dysfunctional and redemption) stemmed. This investigation leads to Jacob’s failed leadership regarding his family. In Genesis 34:30-31, a father-sons conflict emerges soon after they arrive in Canaan when Jacob rebukes Simeon and Levi for recklessly endangering the family by their brutal avenging of their sister, his sons openly defying his authority. Jacob takes no action against them. This was a clear sign of accountability avoidance.⁶ Accountability avoidance occurs when leaders do not take the time to hold those around them accountable for behaviors that tear at the fabric of cohesiveness. When Jacob failed to address the behaviors of his sons, he tolerated the interpersonal discomforts spearheaded by their actions.

Further illustrations of a deterioration of the family structure continued throughout the narrative. In Genesis 35:22, Rueben publicly usurped Jacob’s authority by sleeping with his father’s concubine, Bilhah. Jacob got word of it but did not address the issue. As a result of Jacob’s refusal to hold his sons accountable for their volatile behaviors, resentment ensued, and barbarous behaviors evolved. The father missed key opportunities to build cohesiveness within the family structure, the environment became unproductive and fruitless.

⁵ Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2008), 12, 17.

⁶ Patrick Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 232.

Prior to chapter thirty-seven, the three oldest of Leah's sons attempted to wrest family leadership from their father.⁷ Jacob's failed leadership is revealed even more when the spotlight swings from Leah's sons to Rachel's son, Joseph. The shift is not unexpected, given the alternation of attention to their mothers Leah and Rachel in chapters twenty-nine to thirty. In view of the plot so far, one should interpret Joseph's dreams in chapter thirty-seven as his preemptive claim on family leadership, analogous to the actions of Leah's sons. Jacob repeated the actions with Leah's sons, and he does the same with Rachel's son—he fails at family leadership. Though he does rebuke Joseph for his second dream, he otherwise so favors Joseph that he provokes his other sons to murderous rage. A further indication of his inept leadership is using Joseph to spy on his sons, first on the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah (37:2) and then on all of them.

Successful leaders exemplify an ability to mobilize those within their sphere of influence to achieve shared aspirations.⁸ Conflict occurs when aspirations are not shared among those within the leader's sphere of influence. Contributing factors to Jacob's failure as a leader within the family structure was an absence of trust, and favoritism towards Joshua. A failure to mobilize trust and lead justly and impartially within his family caused even greater divides within the frame of Jacob's family. In the context of the Abrahamic covenant, God promised his descendants "three key provisions: the land, the people, and the blessings."⁹ Though this was not said explicitly, it is plausible to think that the brothers believed that they would not part-take in the blessings passed down from

⁷ Craig Evans, Joel N. Lohr, and David Peterson, *The Book of Genesis: Composition, Reception, and Interpretation* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill Publishing, 2012), 217.

⁸ James M. Kouzes et al., *The Student Leadership Challenge: Activities Book*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: Leadership Challenge, 2014), 459.

⁹ Rydelnik and Vanlaningham, *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 98-99.

their grandfather. The absence of trust weakened Jacob's ability to strengthen the family relationship. According to authors Kouzes and Posner, "leaders foster collaboration by building trust and facilitating relationships."¹⁰ The cohesion needed is used to strengthen individual determination towards a healthy outcome for all involved. Once the family lacks internal trust, the possibility of a cohesive environment is deteriorated and collaborative efforts for the common good are lost.

Brueggemann reminds us that the Joseph story highlights the struggle of a family. It is a specific, concrete family and the story illuminates the issues of power within a family. The crisis in the family is anticipated in the relation between the father and son (Gen. 37:3-4). That in turn sparks the quarrel among the brothers (Gen. 37:19-20). The conflict of the brothers is persistent in the narrative. Even at the death of Jacob, fear evokes new tensions amongst the sons. He continues by reminding us that the family is kept off balance by the dream of Joseph. It looms over the entire family. The dream maybe a blessing but it disturbs the peace and at times seems to be a curse. The family, like many others, would manage better without a dream to disturb and disrupt the normal "proper ordering." The family issues tilt toward politics realities. The narrative concerns the potential for life or death that is related to power.¹¹

Jacob's failure to lead resulted in the sibling rivalry which has influenced the son's behavior since chapter thirty-four. By chapter thirty-seven, the rivalry has narrowed down to Leah's son, Judah, and Rachel's son, Joseph. The three oldest Leah sons have disqualified themselves (Gen. 34; 35:22). Reuben, to be sure, is still competing for family

¹⁰ James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *Christian Reflections on the Leadership Challenge*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 204.

¹¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1982), 294-295.

leadership with Judah in Genesis 37:18-36 and 42:37-42, but those two occasions only demonstrate that Judah's prospects are increasing at his expense.

The rivalry between Reuben and Judah in chapter thirty-seven brings another Genesis theme to the surface: a son's evil acts into means of family salvation. In chapter thirty-seven, both Reuben and Judah try to dissuade their brothers from killing Joseph outright, reminding them that slaying him (Reuben in v. 21) or shedding his blood (Judah in v. 26) would put the brothers in danger of divine retribution. The intentions of the two brothers differ radically, however. Reuben's intent is to rescue Joseph from the pit and restore him to his father (v. 22); whereas, Judah's intent is to sell him to a passing caravan and be rid of him forever (v. 27). If we disregard for the moment the source critical issues of Genesis 37:18-36 with its putative Reuben and Judah sources, and simply look to the effects of the two brother's proposals, we see that one plan is righteous (Reuben's) and the other wicked (Judah's). Consider what would have happened if the brothers had heeded Reuben rather than Judah. The family would have perished in the famine, for it would have had no patron in Egypt to ensure its survival. Judah's immoral counsel, then, adopted by the brothers, paradoxically becomes the means of family survival.¹²

While the hate that Joseph's brothers harbored for him served as the initial conditions for Joseph being thrown into the pit, the catalyst was the moment that he shared his dream with his brothers. This was the final factor that cemented the resentment and jealousy his brothers felt for him and now quite possibly society.¹³ "The dream leads to the first plot in the narrative, the sell-out, the pit, the Egyptians, the bloody clothes,

¹² Evans, Lohr, and Peterson, *The Book of Genesis*, 217.

¹³ Evans, Lohr, and Peterson, *The Book of Genesis*, 217.

[and] the big deception.”¹⁴ Deceptive intentions revealed unpleasant and destructive behavior. The thought of their younger brother reigning over them and their parents infuriated the brothers. They stripped him of his coat before throwing him into the pit (Gen. 37:23). Jacob’s failure to apply his fatherly authority over his children would later create a pathway towards schematic devastation. The absence of a clear vision for his family’s future created a vacuum filled with infighting and discord. A vision for the family would have cultivated interpersonal virtues that would have supported merciful efforts for the family instead of wicked transgressions. Visionary leaders recognize current realities while looking ahead and imagining future possibilities. Since the father was absent of parental vision for his family, when Joseph shared his dream with his brothers, the brothers responded with harmful contentions. Venomous infighting and unproductive discord created negative tensions and various acts of irresponsible behaviors among the brothers.

Several scholars examined the meaning of these dreams. Given the nature of the imagery in the dreams, Arnold Ages comments on why Joseph had the dreams.

Sheaves of wheat and celestial bodies are part of the shepherd’s experience (although farmers have more to do with sheaves than shepherds), but the transforming vision that Joseph confers upon them seems extravagant for a simple, untutored tender of sheep. Especially dramatic is Joseph’s use of the Hebrew words *vatishtachavena* and *mishtachavim*—“bowed to [mine]” and “bowed to [me]”—in his description of the genuflecting sheaves, sun, moon and stars. This is a strong image.¹⁵

¹⁴ Walter Brueggemann, “Dreaming, Being Home, Finding Strangers, and the Seminary,” *Mid-Stream* 26, no. 1 (1987): 63.

¹⁵ A. Ages, “Dreamer, Schemer, Slave and Prince,” *Bible Review* 14, no. 2 (1998): 47–52.

Joseph was indeed the true leader of the family, “Leaders are dreamers. Leaders are idealists. Leaders are possibility thinkers.”¹⁶ The pit was designed to stifle, if not destroy, any possibilities for Joseph’s future elevation.

The disclosure of the dream triggers jealousy in the hearts of the brothers (Gen. 37:8,11 ESV). The word dream (חֲלוֹמִים) is transliterated “chālôwm” and is used to describe a dream which has prophetic meaning. In this passage, the word dream appears [in some form] thirteen times. Brueggemann discusses the importance of Joseph’s dream in this narrative and elaborates on its significance. He asserts, “The dream is a yearning that things need not stay the way they are but will be changed.”¹⁷ This is what his brothers feared. They were threatened at the idea of their younger brother being over them.

The brothers smell the threat immediately (37:8, 11). Dreams are threats. They see their big brotherism jeopardized, power redistributed, perhaps father Jacob's will rewritten to write some in and some out. A dream is not worth a damn unless it imagines a changed world with power shifted. That means inevitably that some of the first may now be last, and the last may be among the first.¹⁸

Brueggemann goes on to state that along with the dream comes “violence, lies, deception, pits, massive ache, and refusal to be comforted.”¹⁹ All of which can be viewed as obstacles that can hinder God’s plan for His people.

This family’s dysfunction is a harrowing account of how those who are trusted and loved the most can seemingly become the very individuals to bring persecution. The very gifts stored inside Joseph caused his brothers to become jealous and envious. He was favored by his father more than his brothers and possessed the gift of dream

¹⁶ Kouzes and Posner, *Christian Reflections on the Leadership Challenge*, 160.

¹⁷ Brueggemann, “Dreaming, Being Home,” 63.

¹⁸ Brueggemann, “Dreaming, Being Home,” 63.

¹⁹ Brueggemann, “Dreaming, Being Home,” 63.

interpretation; a gift that would subsequently lead to his tribulations. Jacob continued the culture of deception as he deceived his brother Esau, tricking him out of his birthright (Gen. 27). Whether or not Jacob's deception was a result of human nature or parental nurturing, one could argue for both sides. The fact is duplicitous behavior was a common practice throughout his life prior to him wrestling with the angel (Gen. 32:22-31).

Joseph's problems began when he had the gift of dream interpretation and shared those interpretations with his father and brethren. He received a dream which allowed him to see that his family would at some point bow to him on earth. Hatred was rampant in the hearts of his brothers; and they could not bear the thought of having to bow to him. The gift bestowed upon him allowed him to receive divine revelations from God. Joseph was pure in heart and his gift was true, never to be exploited or profited for his own gain. He was simply doing the work of God through his gift. The gift represents hope for a people who would soon be amid a famine.

Joseph's gift led his brother's desire to kill him and cast him into a pit (v. 24). The transliteration of the original Hebrew word for pit (בֹּרַ) is "bowr" (Gen. 37:8,11 ESV). One brother suggested he be spared to prevent his blood from being on their hands. They, instead, decided that he should be sold for a profit, then conspired to mislead their father about the disappearance of his favorite son.

Brueggeman suggests that the brothers are not political theorists, but they know the threat of hope. They are the older ones and they have things the way they want them. Against their age and power, the boy is helpless, so he dreams. The dream is a way of hoping for a new arrangement very different than the present. Even as a dream, such hope is a threat. It anticipates the end of the present order. The issue is joined as it always is in

this family. It is not just a petty quarrel but a life and death struggle. One voice in the struggle is for keeping life as it is, resistant to ever hope and vision. The other voice, hopeless as things now stand, thinks revolutionary thoughts of another way. The issue is joined. "Here comes the master of the dreams." The bearer of dreams is a threat. Those who are well off as secure older brothers prefer what is to what may come by way of dreams. They conclude the way to deal with the dream is to kill it. Kill the dreamer and thereby kill the dream.²⁰ Joseph is a glimpse of the hopeful humanity called by God. In hopelessness, the brothers have resolved to kill the dream—but they cannot carry it out. The dream is stronger than their resolve.

At this point in the story, Reuben is presented as responsive but cowardly, and killers of the dream will not be restrained by a responsible, coward. The Reuben episode (vv. 21-24) ends with a second mention of the special robe (v. 23). The giving of the robe has been equated to enthronement (v. 3). Jacob thereby designated his son as his special heir. Now the dream is in jeopardy as the robe serves a different function, now dethronement. Then there is Judah, another coward, but at least respectful of the problem of guilt (vv. 26-28). As a result of his cowardice, the transition is accomplished. The family of promise is at last on its way to Egypt.²¹

Additionally, Joseph's family of origin was one in which deception was the norm. Richard Friedman suggests that each of the deceptions were repaid with deception.²² Before the encounter with Joseph in chapter thirty-seven, Jacob had conspired with his mother Rebekah to trick Esau and Isaac into giving Jacob the birthright, which was meant

²⁰ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 304.

²¹ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 304.

²² R. E. Friedman, "Deception for Deception," *Bible Review* 2, no. 1 (1986): 27.

for the eldest son (Gen. 27:5-29). As a result, Esau hated Jacob and began plans to kill him. However, Rebekah heard of his plans and warned Jacob. The deception does not stop there. In his pursuit of Rachel as a wife, Jacob is deceived by Laban (Gen. 29:13-35). Tradition dictated that the eldest daughter be given away in marriage. Even though Laban had agreed to give Rachel to him in marriage, at the conclusion of the seven years of service, he gave him Leah instead and required him to work an additional seven years. The familial deception carries over as his son's later deceive him concerning the life of his son Joseph. The brothers believed, in their rage, that life could be administered against the dream. However, resistance to the dream requires endless deception. Throughout the narrative's depictions of deception, readers are constantly reminded of the duplicitous behaviors throughout the life of Jacob. In his pursuit of Rachel as a wife, Jacob is deceived by Laban (Gen 29:13-35). In the darkness of the night, and hidden by a veiled covered face, Leah was presented as his bride, rather than the woman he loved, Rachel.

For Joseph, the deception began with the robe. First, it was for enthronement (v. 3). Then it was an instrument of dethronement and symbolic death (v. 23). Now it is used as evidence for the death of the dream. The robe began in deep love. Then it was torn in deep hate. Now, it is the main tool for a deep deception. The deception was so large and the dream so precarious, the narrative ends in grief. The hate of the brothers has triumphed over the profound love of the father. The scene is a ritual of death, despair, and hopelessness. Jacob lives where dreaming causes grief. He goes through the motions. His children play their roles, keeping a proper public face, all the while knowing of their personal hypocrisy (v. 35). How is Jacob to be comforted when the beloved child is no

more? How do hopers hope when the dream is taken? So much hope has been entrusted in the young Joseph, the dreamer. The dreamer torn by the beast carried the future of the people.²³

Jacob, like his father Isaac many years before, was deceived by his son's scheme. This father is broken-hearted, so that all his son's efforts to comfort him prove fruitless. He insists he will mourn publicly for Joseph until his dying days. The brothers may have succeeded in removing the hated Joseph from their sight, but Jacob's gestures will always remind them where his deepest affections lie. Brueggemann concludes, we are all children of grief—if not that of death, then of empty failure, of dreams dreamed but un-lived. All kinds of tomorrows are crushed for the sake of tough, ruthless days. There is ample ground for refusing to be comforted.

Genesis chapter thirty-seven shows Jacob's family fueled from top to bottom by hatred and grief. The rest of the story tells of the resolution of this problem. Meanwhile, we are told that Joseph did reach Egypt, he is still alive, so his dreams have not been killed; but it is certainly very difficult to see a way in which they could be fulfilled. The family's deceitfulness resulted in three descriptive events within this chapter. "First, Joseph will now live in slavery (cf. 39:1-6). Second, Jacob is to live the next 22 years in sorrow, grieving for his favorite son (37:35). Third, Joseph's brothers will continue to live in guilt, always seeing the sin against their brother as the source of all of their woes (cf. 42:21-22; 44:16)."²⁴

To summarize, the theme of the Joseph narrative concerns God hidden and decisive power which works in and through but also against human forms of power. A

²³ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 307.

²⁴ Rydelnik and Vanlaningham, *The Moody Bible Commentary*, 99.

soft word for the reality is “providence.” A harder word for the reality is “predestination.” Either way, God is working out his purpose through and in spite of Egypt, through and in spite of Joseph and his brothers. These themes already come to expression in chapter thirty-seven. If divine overruling is one theme of the Joseph story, human responsibility is its counterpoint, for within the Bible it offers one of the dynamics of family life. Here we see the dire effects of sin on human behavior. Jacob’s favoritism turns normal sibling rivalry into deadly hatred, so that Joseph’s brothers plot to kill him. Jacob is blind to the effects of his actions on his sons.

While fratricide is averted, the tragic effects of this hatred blight the life of Jacob’s family for more than twenty years? Not until circumstances contrive to make the brothers repent of their mistakes are reconciliation and a new life together possible. At one level, the story appears to lay most of the blame for the tragedy at Jacob’s door. If Jacob had he not shown such partiality to Joseph, would such animosity toward him have developed? At another level, the story suggests that Jacob was a victim of his own upbringing. Chapter thirty-seven shows Jacob being deceived by his sons with a kid and their brothers’ garment, just as Jacob had deceived.

This episode cannot be viewed in isolation. It shows great sympathy for Jacob and Joseph’s plight, through hints that both men partly deserve what happened to them. However, the dreams hint that there is more to it than meets the eye: divine purposes are at work in this family’s history. Ultimately, it will be seen that “in everything God works for the good with those who love him who are called according this purpose” (Rom. 8:28). Christian exegetes have often seen Joseph as a type of Christ, the innocent man

through his suffering brings reconciliation to his human brothers and life to the world.²⁵

While the Joseph narrative reveals characteristics that leaders need to overcome the barriers to church growth as seen in Joseph, it also shows those character flaws that need repair in the actions of his brothers. Hate and envy in the hearts of people can lead them to do some regrettable things, as we find the case to be later in the narrative. For the heart to be changed requires the transformative power of the Holy Spirit. Just as Joseph and his brothers had growing to do, the same can be said of church leaders and the people whom we seek to lead others to Christ. The common denominator between us all, regardless of our station in life, is that we are all in need of God's grace. Later in the narrative, when Joseph's brothers are frightened of his potential retaliation, Joseph is very gracious towards them. While the brothers had persecuted him, he placed his focus on the fact that God ordained him to be where he was in Egypt (Gen. 45:7).

Joseph was a man unflawed, but he happened to become a victim at the hands of the ones who should have protected him. God had favor upon his life and there was no circumstance that came to pass which was not predetermined and orchestrated by God. The favor upon Joseph could not be removed, and every negative event was designed for the glory of God. The selected scriptural passage spoke to the power of overcoming and individual transformation. Joseph was blessed, but persecuted. His brothers were flawed, but ultimately evolved and became repentant. Joseph overcame his trials because he remained connected to God. His spirit was in line and in tune with his God-given purpose. From the standpoint of salvation, Joseph's came through direct revelation from God; it was his gift of dream interpretation that allowed him to prosper.

²⁵ Gordon John Wenhan et al., *Genesis 16-50*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: HarperCollins, 2015), 360.

The desire is to explore and study the concepts and spiritual phenomena that lead to growth. As presented in the introduction of this chapter, leading a mega-church can be a difficult task and it must be managed in a way that not only sustains the membership, but also allows it to remain relevant to the membership. As evidenced throughout the two selected scriptures, believers can overcome any circumstance if they operate from a position of faith and remain patient during the process.

In studying congregational transformation, growth in membership is not the primary focus, but it is a factor that cannot be ignored. Congregational transformation, as it will be studied, will include various facets of both implicit and explicit theologies within a congregation. The goal is to identify the true core of what moves individuals to want to remain in a congregation. It is important for pastors of large congregations to be able to effectively speak to the needs of all of their members, and to do so in a manner that remains consistent with the historical biblical contexts, but also with the realities of a current social context. The lifespan of a congregation has much to do with the multifaceted functions of its organizational structure, and to that end, the final goal of the project is to identify the factors that lead to comprehensive growth in the members, both in individual and spiritual transformation. The thesis is that the transformation of a large congregation will be sustained by the layered growth of the individual members.

CHAPTER THREE

HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

The content of this historical foundations chapter will attempt to address several key issues related to religious growth and enlightenment in the United States. The central focus is on Frederick Douglass as a historical figure who helped to enhance the lives of African Americans through his efforts to eradicate slavery. Further, this chapter will include an examination of the role of the Black Church in terms of the economic, civil, and political survival of the communities it represents.

Frederick Douglass is one of the most notable and prominent African Americans of the late nineteenth century. His contributions to the American fabric are unparalleled as they relate specifically to African Americans. He spent twenty years as a slave on the eastern shore of Maryland and in Baltimore. Douglass experienced virtually all of the physical and psychological trauma and scarring that slavery could wreak upon a human being. After being sent to another city by his slave owner, Baltimore became a place where Douglass was able to expand his literacy and world view while working at ship docks. The friendships he made on the streets of Baltimore with white boys, but more importantly, with black preachers and the free black community gave Douglass insight into the realm of possibilities of becoming a free man.

Douglass left slavery with a rage in his heart, and the scarring in his soul would serve to help him become an established visionary. Douglass used his later years to vent

and expend all of the negative circumstances endured during his bondage. He used his experience throughout the rest of his life to ensure that his voice would be heard by speaking for the voiceless. Douglass used his language and his writing to convey the message. Instead of physical violence, he conveyed the atrocities experienced by African Americans through his keen ability as a master of words, and eventually, as a world-renowned orator. The Bible had a profound influence on Douglass, and that was reflected in his numerous speeches where he referenced the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Through those books he was able to convey the stories of his people.

His unwavering faith, focus, and ability to overcome were fueled by his unending desire for freedom and justice; the journey of surviving the atrocities of slavery, learning how to read, his numerous attempts to escape slavery, becoming a freeman, a prominent abolitionist, statesman, author, and respected figure around the world is a legacy to behold. Douglass rose to become the leader and spokesperson of the United States Abolition Movement, as well as a statesman, speaking to thousands nationally and internationally to share his story in an eloquent, unabashed manner. Douglass became the most photographed African American of the nineteenth century. His sheer identity of being such a recognizable figure put him at risk for much of his life; but in spite of all of the risks, he was relentless in his pursuit of equality for all. "If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, and deprecate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightning."¹

¹ Philip Foner and Yuval Taylor, eds., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings* (Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Brothers, 1999).

Born Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey, he marked his birthdate as February fourteenth. He was born to a black mother, who was known as the only slave in the area, where she lived, to know how to read and write, and a slave-master father. He was eventually separated from his mother and sent to live with his grandmother and her son after his mother died. He began his life as a slave at six years old, on the eastern shore of Maryland. Douglass had his first experience of slavery that would haunt him for the rest of his life. His Aunt Hester was not present in her cabin one night when the slave master desired her presence. When Aunt Hester returned, the slave master was relentless in the savagery of the whipping he placed upon her body. Douglass was a witness to this brutality at a formidable and early age.²

The Baltimore slave owner, Hugh Auld's wife, Sophia, initially provided instruction on the letters of the alphabet. Sophia soon stopped after complaints from her husband. Hugh's position was that if slaves learned how to read and write, they would want their freedom and seek it out. Douglass viewed this time with Mrs. Auld as his "first decidedly antislavery lecture" in response to the position of Mr. Auld. Douglass firmly believed that "Once you learn to read, you will be forever free."³ He began seeking out any and every opportunity to read publications and books and was especially interested in the book *The Columbian Orator*, which was a literacy teaching tool, giving insight into ideas about freedom and human rights. Douglass never wanted to keep the gift of literacy to himself and began teaching the New Testament to slaves from other plantations during Sunday school. Dozens were taught, unnoticed for quite some time until one day, the

² Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom: Part I – Life as a Slave; Part II – Life as a Freeman* (New York, NY: Orton and Mulligan, 2003).

³ Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*.

slave owners burst into the Sunday school class and used clubs and stones to communicate their discontent.⁴

Douglass, during his late teens, was moved to the plantation of Edward Covey.

During his first few days at Covey's plantation Douglass wrote:

I had not been in his possession three whole days, before he subjected me to the most brutal chastisement. Under his heavy blows, blood flowed freely, and wales were left on my back as large as my little finger. The sores on my back, from this flogging, continued for weeks, for they were kept open by the rough and coarse cloth which I wore for shirting.⁵

Douglass labeled Covey the "Negro Breaker." Enduring the reign and eventually defying slave-breaker Covey was the catalyst for Douglass to overcome this unimaginable existence. This experience increased his confidence and allowed him to gain the courage and will to mentally and physically resist his circumstance of slavery. Douglass began to fight back against Covey, and after this encounter with Douglass, Covey never used violence to try and control him ever again. Douglass had to regroup, and with his strong sense of self, Douglass was able to convince his master that he was content in being a slave so that he could execute his plan to escape slavery.

Douglass knew he could no longer remain a slave. He soon met a free woman, Anne Marie, who inspired him to seek his own freedom; they fell in love and later married. In 1836, he attempted to escape slavery but was caught, thrown in jail, and returned to his owner. Two years later, on September 3, 1838, Douglass said, "I felt assured that if I failed in this attempt, my case would be a hopeless one. It would seal my

⁴ Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*.

⁵ Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*.

fate as a slave forever.”⁶ Douglass’s savviness provided him with the idea to obtain papers from a black sailor that indicated that he was a free man. Douglass had to act the part of a sailor; he costumed himself in a red shirt, black cravat, and a sailor’s hat, but one last obstacle to overcome was the physical description on the document. If an official actually viewed and considered the physical measurements, the journey to freedom would be over for Douglass. He left his owner’s plantation on a train to Philadelphia, and as Douglass suspected, he faced an inspection where he was asked to show free papers. Douglass handed over his sailor papers to the official and said, “I never carry my free papers to sea with me... I have a paper with the American eagle on it that will carry me round the world.”⁷ The answer and the papers were enough for the conductor, and Douglass was able to continue on his trip, but he still had to make it through several slave states to reach his destination, where the risk of arrest was possible. When the train arrived in New York, Douglass stepped off the train and made his way to a group of Underground Railroad activists. Being in a free state but not a technically free man, he was now a fugitive. Douglass expressed his feelings of overcoming slavery to this point:

I have often been asked, how I felt when I first found myself on free soil... There is scarcely anything in my experience about which I could not give a more satisfactory answer. A new world had opened upon me. If life is more than breath, and the ‘quick round of blood,’ I lived more in one day than in a year of my slave life. It was a time of joyous excitement which words can but tamely describe.⁸

The Underground Railroad activists provided him shelter for one day and got word to his beloved Anna that he was free. She soon left Baltimore, they married, and later moved further north to Massachusetts. Life was somewhat safer for a fugitive slave; however,

⁶ Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*.

⁷ Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*.

⁸ Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*.

Douglass had to work extraordinarily hard to find even menial work due to the prejudice that existed. While in New Bedford, Douglass became a licensed preacher, taught Sunday school, and served as church sexton. There he became involved in the abolitionist movement.

The writings of William Lloyd Garrison, a white man, inspired Douglass, and he avidly read his newspaper, *The Liberator*. The Antislavery Society's annual convention in Massachusetts unexpectedly asked Douglass to speak at one of their events. Nervously, Douglass accepted, and unlike his white counterparts, he was able to speak both eloquently and thoughtfully about his personal experiences and pain as a slave for two hours, with all who were present captivated by his speech. Becoming a key player in the abolitionist movement, Douglass soon began receiving requests from numerous organizations to speak, each time rousing the crowd.

Two decades before the Civil War, in 1843, Frederick Douglass joined the American Antislavery Society and began to tour the Midwestern United States, participating in the 100 Conventions Project for about six months, speaking and spreading the message of the importance of abolishing slavery. Danger was always a strong consideration due to the strong support from those who supported slavery. In one incident in Indiana, Douglass broke his hand during a melee between the two opposing sides. In 1845, the highly successful autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* was reprinted nine times and translated so it could be sold in Europe, but also came at a cost due to the publicity and exposure the book brought to Douglass because he was not a freeman in the eyes of the law. Instead of going into hiding in the United

States, Douglass opted to move to Europe for three years, where he would be safe from arrest and began touring in England, Ireland, and Scotland for the next few years. The European supporters of Douglass were so moved and impressed by his story and movement that they began to raise money for him to buy his freedom in America.

Douglass was also as impressed with the Europeans, writing,

Instead of a democratic government, I am under a monarchical government...
Instead of the bright, blue sky of America, I am covered with the soft, grey fog of the Emerald Isle. I breathe, and lo! the chattel becomes a man. I gaze around in vain for one who will question my equal humanity, claim me as his slave, or offer me an insult... I find myself regarded and treated at every turn with the kindness and deference paid to white people. When I go to church, I am met by no upturned nose and scornful lip to tell me, "We don't allow niggers in here!"⁹

His supporters were successful in raising enough money to buy Frederick Douglass his freedom; and in 1847 he returned to America to rejoin his wife, family, and the course of freeing the millions of slaves. *The North Star*, a four-page weekly, was founded and published by Douglass out of Rochester, New York. He also took interest and spoke about causes of women, speaking at the Women's Convention, advocating for the right of women to vote and for the desegregation of schools a century before *Brown v. Board of Education*. In the late 1840s and early 1850s, he became more interested in politics.

In July of 1852, during Independence Day, Douglass was asked to give a speech at an event commemorating the signing which was held at Rochester's Corinthian Hall. In his razor-sharp oration he told his audience, "This Fourth of July is your, not mine.

⁹ Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*.

You may rejoice, I must mourn.”¹⁰ He then posed to the audience, “Do you mean, citizens, to mock me, by asking me to speak to-day?”¹¹ This speech was considered by many to be one of the most moving passages of all of the Douglass speeches:

What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sound of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants brass fronted impudence; your shout of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanks-givings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of the United States, at this very hour.¹²

During the mid-1850s, Douglass was befriended by John Brown, a white man who was vehemently against slavery; and felt it was immoral to own a slave. Brown stayed for a month at the residence of Douglass in Rochester and began making plans for a raid into Virginia and incitement of a slave revolt. Brown felt very strongly that bloodshed may be necessary to abolish slavery, so he organized a revolt known as Harper’s Ferry in Virginia and invited Douglass to participate. Douglass met Brown near Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, and after careful consideration, he declined the ill-fated raid. Douglass departed the country in October 1859 as he was sought by U.S. Marshalls as an accomplice. The Harper’s Ferry Rebellion did not turn out as planned by Brown and his followers; as punishment, Brown and his men were hung after the revolt. Douglass sailed to England via Canada, staying for six months, but returned after the death of his eleven-

¹⁰ History.com, “Frederick Douglass,” A and E Television Network, updated December 4, 2019, accessed December 19, 2019, <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/frederick-douglass>.

¹¹ Foner and Taylor, *Frederick Douglass*.

¹² Foner and Taylor, *Frederick Douglass*.

year-old daughter, Annie. This event was another influential factor in the movement Douglass was committed to.

Being a highly recognized figure in America in the abolitionist movement and other causes, and to many, the conscience of the nation, Douglass sought not only to bring the nation together, but to end the system of slavery and ensure that blacks had equal rights to their counterparts. Douglass was clear about his support of black men fighting for the Union during the Civil War: “A war undertaken and brazenly carried for the perpetual enslavement of the colored men, calls logically and loudly for the colored men to help suppress it.”¹³ Douglass also was able to connect with Abraham Lincoln, speaking to the president about the inclusion of African Americans in the army. In 1863, Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation which allowed African Americans to serve in the army. Douglass’s three sons became active in serving in the army.

When time’s ample curtain shall fall upon our national tragedy, and our hillsides and valleys shall neither redden with the blood nor whiten with the bones of kinsmen and countrymen who have fallen in the sanguinary and wicked strife; when grim visaged war has smoothed his wicked front and our country shall have regained its normal condition as a leader of nations in the occupation and blessings of peace- and history shall record the names of heroes and martyrs- who bravely answered the call of patriotism and Liberty- against traitors, thieves and assassins- let it not be said that in the long list of glory, composed of men of all nations- there appears the name of no colored man.¹⁴

When the Civil War ended and slavery was outlawed, Douglass did not step away from public life and continued on the path of activism.

Douglass was appointed as president of the Freedmen’s Bank, an organization that promoted economic development in the African American community and continued

¹³ Foner and Taylor, *Frederick Douglass*.

¹⁴ Foner and Taylor, *Frederick Douglass*.

speaking across the country to support Ulysses S. Grant's run for president of the United States in 1868. In 1872, Douglass was nominated by the equal rights party to be the vice-presidential running mate with Victoria Woodall, and in 1888, Douglass was the first African American to receive the nomination of a major party to run in a presidential race. Douglass spent the last two decades of his life in Washington, D.C., where he served as a U.S. Marshal and minister to the Republic of Haiti, appointed by President Hayes. He would later resign his assignment in Haiti when it was revealed that American businessmen were taking advantage of his position in their dealing with the government of Haiti.¹⁵

Douglass and his wife Anna resided in a home in Cedar Hill. The love of his life, Anna died in 1882 after forty-four years of marriage. In 1884, Douglass remarried a much younger white woman, Helen Pitts, his former secretary. This marriage caused considerable controversy in the Douglass family as well as the black community. Political appointments continued for Douglass. He served in diplomatic positions, as the Recorder of Deeds for Washington, D.C., and as the commissioner of the Wells Columbia Exposition. Tirelessly crusading for rights and continuing to advocate for others, his 1895 speech at the National Women's Convention would be his last. He died of a heart attack on February 20, 1895 at seventy-seven years old.¹⁶

Frederick Douglass risked his life for freedom; when he escaped from slavery, he advocated for the end of slavery, the right to vote, and civil rights for all during his time as a public servant and a public figure. "Where justice is denied, where poverty is

¹⁵ Foner and Taylor, *Frederick Douglass*.

¹⁶ Foner and Taylor, *Frederick Douglass*.

enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel that society is an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe.”¹⁷

Douglass is an essential figure to study not only because of his political and historical contributions, but also because of his status as a religious figure. During his time, America was operating as a nation in search of independence, and despite its flaws and inconsistencies, slavery, for example, was a land viewed by many as a place where faith and hard work would guarantee that an individual prospered free of ridicule. Douglass was alive during the time when America was involved in a major cultural shift. It was also a time when African American religious leaders were leading the effort to free slaves.

Before the Revolutionary War of 1776, black slaves attended church with their masters or were taken to church by their masters. Slaves were taken to church for several reasons. Slaves were known to revolt against their masters and to plan escapes for their freedom. So, to keep an eye on them their masters took them to church. Many worshippers in the church believed that slavery was right and good; it was not an immoral institution and that slavery had some beneficial effort on the slave. Perhaps, it was important that slaves attend church that they might be ‘brainwashed’ into believing that slavery was their God-given position and condition for life.

This idea was developed by white ministers using the Bible in an effort to make slaves obedient and trustworthy to their masters. Black slaves were instructed to obey their masters and to work hard and consistently if they wanted to make it to heaven.

¹⁷ History.com, “Frederick Douglass,” accessed December 19, 2019, <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/frederick-douglass>.

Therefore, a major reason for having slaves attend church was to condition them for their life in slavery.

Before the Revolutionary War, because of their smaller numbers, blacks had some freedom attending white churches of their choice, particularly in the North. However, as their numbers grew, they were segregated to the rear or balcony of the church. This segregation led to separation from the church, especially in the North where freed slaves had more of an opportunity to express themselves.

By the time of the Revolutionary War, slavery in the New England colonies had ended and there were many freed slaves that resided in the colonies. Moral standards were low. People were hungry for spiritual leadership and development. The Methodist Movement was going on during this time. John Wesley sent Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury to the states and through this movement the Methodist Episcopal Church was established. Methodism held that slavery was wrong and seemed suited to the colonial situation. Methodism was introduced to the people – both slave and free men – by preachers, who allowed nothing to stop in their mission of spreading the word. Many colonists resented their way of life and in retaliation many preachers were physically attacked; and churches were burned down.

During and after the Revolutionary War, black churches were started in the North, and in some instances, southern states, generally South Carolina or Georgia. These churches were usually Baptist or Methodist and were organized by freed black slaves. The Baptists and Methodist seemed to best meet the emotional and psychological needs of blacks. One of the first Baptist churches, First African Baptist Church, was founded by Reverend George Liele (also Lisle or Leile) in 1777, in Savannah, Georgia. Liele was

born a slave in Virginia, then taken to Georgia where he was converted in 1773, in the church of his master. He began preaching in 1775.

Richard Allen and Absalom Jones founded the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1794 (1787,) after they withdrew from St. George's Methodist Church because of "unkind treatment." The numbers of blacks increased to the point where the trustees felt compelled to order all blacks to the gallery or rear of the church. James Varick and Abraham Thompson met the same treatment at the John Street Methodist Episcopal Church in New York City. They withdrew and founded the Mother African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church.

As the focus of segregation and discrimination against blacks in churches spread throughout the North, blacks left to form and establish their own places of worship. In 1809, Reverend James Burrows and others established the First African Baptist Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The Reverend Thomas Paul, Sr., organized the African Baptist Church in 1809 in Boston, Massachusetts. Rev. Paul also helped to establish the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, New York in 1808.

The Reverend Morris Brown in 1817, organized the (Mother) Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. During the post-revolutionary period, Methodist and Baptist denominations spread quickly throughout the North and the South as blacks sought release from the miseries of plantation life.

Between 1820 and 1855, the activity of the Black Church was slowed considerably because of the many slave revolts. In this period there is also the peak of the abolitionist movement. Abolitionist such as Harriet Tubman, Charles Redmon, Williams Garrison, certainly Frederick Douglass and many others were writing and

speaking about the evils of slavery. Many of these people helped slaves escape to northern states where slavery was forbidden. Such activities led whites to distrust and suppress the activities of the black church. Black preachers were not allowed to preach for fear that they would start slave revolts. Still the Black Church and black ministers played an important role in aiding fugitive slave and establishing channels of communication between anti-slavery groups and plantation slaves.

Douglass had considered joining a white Methodist Church, but was disappointed when he saw that it was segregated. He later joined the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church which counted as members Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman. He was licensed to preach in 1839.

Douglass started publishing his first abolitionist newspaper, the *North Star*, from the basement of Memorial African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Rochester, New York. The *North Star's* motto was "Right is of no Sex – Truth is of no Color – God is the Father of us all, and we are all brethren."¹⁸

Douglass sharply criticized the attitude of religious people who kept silent about slavery. He considered that a law passed to support slavery was "one of the grossest infringements of Christian Liberty" and said that pro-slavery clergymen within the American Church "stripped the love of God of its beauty, and leave the throne of religion a huge, horrible, repulsive form", and "an abomination in the sight of God."¹⁹

In the Civil War Period the Black Church took on many responsibilities which supported the blacks' fight for freedom. The Bible was used by ministers to teach the fundamentals of reading and writing. The church grew as a powerful instrument in

¹⁸ Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*.

¹⁹ Foner and Taylor, *Frederick Douglass*.

helping blacks move to free northern states. Most black ministers used every available opportunity, in and out of church, to speak about freedom, equality and justice for all blacks. Black congregations in the North gave support to slaves by hiding them and by setting up fugitive escape stations, by going south to give physical aid, materials and financial aid. Leaders like Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth used the church to deliver freedom messages.

The Black Church in the Post-Civil War and Reconstruction Period gave valuable service to freed men. The Black Church served as a center for educational activities and led all efforts in educating blacks. Local community schools were started through the initial work of churches. The church served as a training ground for black organizations and businesses. It assisted in finding employment and living quarters for freed men. It provided medical care for blacks. One of the most important functions of the black church during this time was developing blacks for leadership positions in the community.

Black Churches took the lead in establishing schools and centers of learning for blacks. Education was seen as the number one need for blacks during this period. The Baptists established Shaw University, Roger Williams University, Morehouse College, Leland College and Benedict College. The Methodist established Walden University, Morgan State University, Claflin College (University), and Clark Atlanta University. The African Methodist Episcopal Zions established Zion Wesley Institute (Livingstone College with Hood Theological Seminary) and Clinton Institute (Clinton College). The American Missionary Association established Fisk University. The Presbyterians established Lincoln University; and the Congregationalists established Howard

University. Educational institutions were established to meet the needs of the community.

No group in society has historically generated the kind of support the Black Church has for the disenfranchised. The Black Church was the first school in the community. The Black church has been the primary carrier of black folk culture. It has been the pacesetter for values that are positive and affirming. The Black Church helped our forefathers to survive slavery. It was the Black Church that not only preached spiritual freedom, but total freedom; and Douglass' notoriety helped to develop the Black Church.

The Black Church served to enhance the economic, civil, and political survival of its various members. The economic needs of blacks in the nineteenth century were tremendous. The northern states became bedlams of radical thought and ideas, with many of their most populace cities such as Boston, Massachusetts becoming havens for freed slaves. The reality of any individual who had either been freed from slavery, escaped from slavery, or happened to be born a "free" black during slavery was sharply contradictory. The economic needs of each presented a special set of circumstances and challenges, and in order to ensure individual economic survival, the church was obligated to welcome these people into the fold and help them establish themselves in a manner that would offer personal sustainability.

From an economic standpoint, the Black Church engaged in literacy programs to help its members navigate in a free society. The Black Church would often have served as a place where blacks could pray on Sunday, and where children would attend school during the week. Any education, training, or guidance served to assist masses of blacks

understand the challenges of their civil realities and provide them with the tools for leverage to overcome those challenges. The political climate was changing so much during this era that many of the black preachers were specifically called upon to speak on behalf of their people, as much as they were also required to speak to their people. The formation of the various black denominations, of this time, was significant because the churches served as an organized body for worship, education, and culture.

The long-term sustainability of predominantly African American denominations was vital to the collective survival of blacks. The social climate in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was vastly changing; therefore, churches had to maintain relevancy in order to adjust and evolve from serving a group of people in bondage to serving a group of people coming out of bondage.

Douglass embodied the culmination of ideological shifts in culture and society with his oratory skills and ability to command the ear of those, blacks and whites alike, who would work to abolish slavery and solidify a lasting change for blacks in America. It could be said that he was the impetus leading to the establishment of black preachers and black churches lighting the way for change and progress. African American denominations solidified their long-term sustainability by constantly evolving and remaining relevant and present in the various movements and social proclivities of the times.

Economic empowerment was relevant for the established minority congregations of the time because it was necessary for blacks coming out of slavery, and for those remaining in it to be able to sustain themselves completely. Richard Allen, a former slave, established the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia for the

purpose of having a place where blacks could worship with dignity.²⁰ In so doing, Allen was, in essence, preaching a theology of defiance which was common for many at the time. In this theology of defiance, the economics of slavery and bondage were central to the mandates that blacks be able to establish themselves and stand independently of a master's ownership. The significance of the black preachers was that they were called and elected to deliver the message of deliverance and prosperity. It was understood that true freedom would not come without economic empowerment. This could not have been possible without the contributions of Frederick Douglass.

It became clear during this era that the blacks of the time sought an answer to their salvation in a manner that reflected equality from a humanistic standpoint. The formation of the African American denominations happened during a time when cultural sensitivities were somewhat nonexistent. The Black Church served to enhance the economic, civil, and political survival of its various members. The creation of these churches caused another significant movement in which African American preachers began to spread their messages through missionary work abroad. Douglass' work would not have been as significant had he lacked the capacity to command a crowd during his oratorical displays. His mastery of language, both spoken and written, was the gift that allowed people to sympathize with the slaves. His ability to deliver a perfectly illustrated image of the brutalities of slavery affected the hearts of men.

In summation, Frederick Douglass was central in helping to establish a precedence of black leaders taking the forefront for the causes of their people. He helped lay a foundation for Black Churches to be of the utmost importance to the economic,

²⁰ Brian K. Clardy, "Deconstructing a Theology of Defiance: Black Preaching and the Politics of Racial Identity," *Journal of Church and State* 53, no. 2 (January 28, 2011): 203-21.

civil, and political survival of the communities of people they represent. He helped to push an agenda of blanket tolerance. Blanket tolerance, for the purpose of this project, is defined as the construct by which attitudes of tolerance and acceptance shift within the social and cultural paradigms of the popular beliefs of the time. For example, slavery would have been an issue central to the cognitive mental shifts of the people who advocated for its eradication. The abolishment of slavery became a social issue which preyed upon the moral nature and good conscience of the majority, who, for previous generations, had turned a blind eye to the issue. The shifts in congregational mentalities were conduits to political action and a threat to the economic infrastructure of the southern United States.

Douglass' message of blanket tolerance provided a new perspective of perseverance, economic empowerment, and cultural identity that was otherwise not being addressed in a comprehensive manner. At some point, the social views of the time and era were questioned, reexamined, and reassessed. In short, enlightenment happened.

Frederick Douglass overcame the obstacles of slavery, segregation and mistreatment. As he overcame his own obstacles, he led and encouraged others to join him that they too might overcome theirs. His life stands as an example and a historical reminder that we, like Frederick Douglass, can overcome the obstacles and circumstances that we may be facing in our own lives.

CHAPTER FOUR

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

Liberation theology, as it has developed in the late twentieth century, is a theology developed out of an oppressed existence in order to guide and resurrect an oppressed people to an identity of liberation. James Hal Cone is considered the author of what we know today to be the black theology of liberation. In as much as this theology has a centered focus on the black experience in America, it is much more than a theology specific to black people, but rather a theology that attempts to isolate the dominant theology of the traditional Anglo-Christian view that surmises that the will of God is inherent in all circumstances and events including the events of oppression and suppression of people in America who are non-white. Though this theology was birthed out of an American worldview, liberation theology can be applied across the globe where any group is being oppressed by a dominant white majority, or in the case of South Africa, a dominant white minority. It is from this perspective that the theology of liberation, and specifically theology from the perspective of blacks in America and abroad will be explored and addressed.

Black liberation theology (BLT), with its emergence dating back to the late 1960's, argues that God identifies with the oppressed and examples of such are prevalent throughout the Old Testament beginning in Exodus and continuing through to the New Testament in Matthew, Luke, John, Romans and many more New Testament books.

While it is clear through scripture that certain groups, such as the Jews, have been oppressed at length both in biblical and modern times, the central premise of black liberation theology is that there must be a perspective and paradigm of change specific to the black experience of being oppressed. This chapter will attempt to examine the state of the black experience in the United States as well as the black experience across the African Diaspora with particular focus on the condition of blacks specific to South Africa. In terms of black theology, an attempt will be made to expose the black experience through a lens of politics, economics, and social and human capital.

The present trends in Black Theology U.S.A. commenced around the middle of the 1980's and are characterized by the growth of a second generation of black theologians, including younger African American thinkers who emphasize an exploration of theology from any and all aspects of black life and, most strikingly, the exciting challenge of womanists black female religious scholars who have pressed for a holistic Black theology that integrates race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and ecological analyses.¹

The goal and purpose herein, is to add a voice to the theories of James Hal Cone by offering a perspective of pre and post black theology with present and future implications.

Hopkins' and Thomas' critique of the black theology movement describes the four types of narratives necessary for blacks to develop a healthy self: the soul narrative, the rationale narrative, the playful narrative, and the dialogical narrative self.² These interwoven complexities illustrated the black experience of God, self, and community. In

¹ Dwight N. Hopkins and Linda E. Thomas, "Black Theology U.S.A. Revisited," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, no. 100 (March 1998): 63, accessed July 13, 2019, <https://login.proxy033.nclive.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/213343343?accountid=9994>.

² Hopkins and Thomas, "Black Theology U.S.A. Revisited," 66, accessed July 14, 2019, <https://login.proxy033.nclive.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/213343343?accountid=9994>.

reflection of what was prevalent in the 1980's in comparison to the black experience of today, there is an apparent reversion of social progress which has become more and more revealing in the last ten years in American culture and society. It is expected that the frameworks laid from the late 1960s in black theology would have resonated in a manner as to provide guidance and stability to the clergy in terms of how to address black congregations whom often suffer in silence outside of their own communities.

Unfortunately, many black pastors have seen the tides shift negatively in terms of political, social and economic progress. The reversion of progress seems at times misleading, but more often than not, it has shed a new light on the need for a comprehensive black liberation theological perspective that just as much celebrates the positive, while indeed acknowledging that there is so much more to be done in terms of holistic growth in the lives of blacks in the United States as well as South Africa.

The United States and South Africa share a dialectic history of oppression through the enforcement of prejudicial and racial policies designed to keep the powerful white majority in power, and the black minority subjugated. The racial struggles of the U. S. and those of South Africa are similar, but unique in that blacks in South Africa make up the majority, not the minority; yet they are still oppressed and powerless due in large part to economics. The policies of apartheid kept blacks in South Africa oppressed until 1994 when the first democratic elections were held, but as the research presents, BLT emerged in South Africa during the late 1960s. It was indeed inspired by the Civil Rights Movement and took inspiration from both Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, and the work of James Hal Cone.³

³ Rothney S. Tshaka, "Malcolm X's the Ballot or the Bullet Speech? Its Implications for Black Liberation Theology in Present-Day South Africa," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 71, no. 3 (2015): 1-8.

According to Tshaka, “some African Traditional Churches came into existence primarily because they were not comfortable with a theology and a theological reflection that refused to take the black experience seriously. They were considered too radical and were dismissed as mere sects, not to be taken seriously by any ‘proper’ theological reflection.”⁴ Black liberation theology in South Africa was chastised as improper in large part because it took on a political brand which was viewed as a guerilla enterprise. Due to this characterization, it was difficult for BLT to penetrate the black communities it intended to empower. The hypothesis inherent in BLT was that by gaining political power, the economy would conform to the dictates of politics. The reality of post-apartheid South Africa is similar to the reality of blacks in America post, Civil Rights. Although these movements came and went, the question posed now is, why do so many blacks feel as though they are in “dead places?”

To go deeper into this concept, it is important to shed light upon Acts 14:19 so that God may give revelation for the situations, complications, devastations, and dying places that are encountered in life. Acts 14:19 states:

But some Jews arrived there from Antioch and Iconium; and having persuaded the people and won them over, they stoned Paul and [afterward] dragged him out of town, thinking that he was dead. But the disciples formed a circle about him, and he got up and went back into the town and on the morrow he went on with Barnabas to Derbe.

With this scripture, God has a distinct message that individuals must live through their dying places. When reading the scripture in Acts 14:19, one wonders how a man like the Apostle Paul, an anointed man, whom Jesus appeared to, the man chosen of God to bring salvation to the Gentiles, the writer of most of the New Testament, could find himself in such a treacherous and deadly state. The apostle was not out looking for trouble, he was

⁴ Tshaka, “Malcolm X’s the Ballot or the Bullet Speech?” 2.

being punished for helping someone else. His punishment was not light either; for the people did not just beat him, but they stoned him and dragged him out of town. When they laid him there, they thought he was dead. As an accompanying scripture to Acts 14:19, Ezekiel 37: 3-4 states, "Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord God, thou knowest. Again, he said unto me, Prophesy upon these bones, and say unto them, 'O ye dry bones, HEAR THE WORD OF THE LORD.'" In Genesis chapter thirty-two, Jacob wrestles with God. Verses twenty-two through twenty-six says:

And he arose that night and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven sons, and crossed over the ford of Jabbok. He took them, sent them over the brook, and sent over what he had. Then Jacob was left alone; and a Man wrestled with him until the breaking of day. Now when He saw that He did not prevail against him, He touched the socket of his hip; and the socket of Jacob's hip was out of joint as He wrestled with him. And He said, "Let me go, for the day breaks." But he said, "I will not let You go unless You bless me!"

Looking at this moment in the life of Jacob, it does not necessarily depict him in a dying situation; however, he did have an awesome experience with God. Jacob encounters a theophoric manifestation of God in the form of an angel (a Man) and Jacob wrestles with this angel all night long. The angel then requests that Jacob let him go for "day is breaking." Jacob replies, "I will not let You go unless You bless me." A dying place is not just a body in a casket, ready to be put into an open grave.

Both black theology and black liberation theology were born out of what many blacks consider to be dead places. If one cannot vote, and has no political voice or wealth, then they are in a dead place amongst the living. If one is being treated less than a man and brutalized by the police who are sworn to protect and serve, then one is in a dead place. The message apparent in BLT, and of the leaders who helped inspire the movements, was coaxing blacks into a period of revelation in the sense that they wanted

nothing more than to help and empower them through fair treatment and equal involvement in the societies to which they belonged. The reality is that when people look at their dying situation, that situation that has no hope, they feel that it has become dead and cannot ever be revived again. It is at this juncture that BLT is relevant because it must add a voice to the conversation that speaks specifically to the concerns of the oppressed if there is to be change in a positive manner for all.

All of us, at some point in our lives are living through dying places. No, not one of us has called a physical mortuary, but we have been through those times where trials, trouble and tribulations have left us so dejected and depleted, that we feel almost spiritually vanquished. Understand dead places happen to us all, regardless of our societal stature and class, where we live, what we drive, or how anointed we are. There are going to be times in life where individuals will be presented with the question from Ezekiel, "Can these dry bones live?" The only reply to God will be "Lord only you know." The frustrations that spawned the birth of black theology are just as much rooted in democracy and the current political system of what many view as treatment unequal under the law. From a historical perspective, W.E. B. Du Bois wrote extensively about the condition of blacks in the late nineteenth century, and his work as a leading philosopher of his day, aided in the foundation of what would come to be known as black theology. His work spanned politics, economics, religion, and culture. Du Bois wrote in one of his most acclaimed works, *The Souls of Black Folks*, the following about religious growth specific to blacks:

The religious growth of millions of men, even though they be slaves, cannot be without potent influence upon their contemporaries. The Methodists and Baptists of America owe much of their condition to the silent but potent influence of their millions of Negro converts. Especially is this noticeable in the South, where

theology and religious philosophy are on this account a long way behind the North, and where the religion of the poor whites is a plain copy of Negro thought and methods. The mass of "gospel" hymns which has swept through American churches and well-nigh ruined our sense of song consists largely of debased imitations of Negro melodies made by ears that caught the jingle but not music, the body but not the soul, of the jubilee songs. It is thus clear that the study of Negro religion is not only a vital part of the history of the Negro in America, but no interesting part of American History.⁵

As a point of reference, what Du Bois spoke of is very similar to the need for liberation and inclusion. In essence, the root of black theology centered on the belief that there must be a specific theology that gives credibility to the experience of the oppressed since much of God's most notable acts revolve around the liberation of an oppressed Jewish people. Thus, God must have a message specific to those groups, and in most cases the oppressed in America and South Africa are blacks. In order to further add perspective, the dying place is any place where one may push forward, only to be rejected and purposely held down. In the context of American history, civil rights is a dying place, police brutality is a dying place, mass incarceration of blacks and Latinos is a dying place, voter suppression is a dying place, economic disparities are dying places; and black theology is designed to identify and overcome these dying places.

Life will be filled with some things that are not going to make sense, and often one will wonder how or why they may be in a particular situation. For example, as the black experience in America transpired, as far back as the year 1619, when the first Africans were brought to Virginia, there was no reason other than one groups desire to enslave another in order to profit off of their blood, sweat, and tears. In the dominate theology of the time, the white Anglo-Saxon doctrine, those who were committed to the act of slavery justified their evils by decreeing that it was their duty and God-given right

⁵ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2005), 238.

to dominate and subjugate any group whom they considered to be ignorant, uncivilized, and beneath them. It was with this mindset that the genocide of the Native Americans was able to transpire, and the enslavement of Africans was able to last until the late 1800s. Thus, the question becomes, how were these Christians able to look at other human beings and determine that those human beings who were outside of their group of reference, deserved to be either enslaved or eradicated? This threat of the enemy can shake one to the very foundation of who they are as an individual; and will expose you to what otherwise might seem to be your demise. These are those places that cripple you to the very essence of your soul. They leave you at a point where you have no desire to go forward because the things you overcame and the fight that you are in right now has expended all of your energy. These times are bleak and call for a type of theology that can relate to that individual experience of oppression.

In order for BLT to further serve its purpose, there are circumstances that must be present and that all must adhere. For example, while it is a fallacy to surmise that all white theology is inherently bad; it is also a fallacy to surmise that black theology is only relevant to blacks. Rather, it is important to surmise that black theology as a theology of oppression is inclusive of all marginalized groups who at some point or another find themselves in a position of subjugation.

As this theology has been fleshed out over the last few decades, there is much debate about where and how it should lead now, in a current cultural context. From the standpoint of the current cultural context, blacks in America are experiencing unprecedented cases of mistreatment by not only the judicial system, but from their neighbors alike. There has been a shift of recent years which allows and adheres to a

particular type of pedagogy that reiterates the negative of a black society while justifying the mistreatment of blacks by their white counterparts. For example, during the early 1990s in this country, many were witnesses to the generation of video and surveillance footage, which essentially depicted on camera, the brutality of police beatings of black citizens. This is no attempt to cause blame; however, it is a clear example of the oppression that blacks have historically faced, and will continue to face, in this country, at the hands of white police officers.

In the last four years society has witnessed countless blacks being murdered at the hands of police while cell phone footage depicts each instance blow by blow. More often than not, the officers involved in these shootings were acquitted. How is this relevant to liberation theology? The theology of liberation exists to shed light on the reality of the oppressed, and in order to undo the wrongs and to liberate the oppressed, this theology asks that those who are not oppressed begin to view the world from the perspective of the oppressed. It further suggests that to sit idly by and watch this type of oppression without taking action against it is to condone the very oppressive acts. Liberation theology is concerned with eliminating these kinds of dead places, and circumstances to move the oppressed to a place of equality and power. When those in power allow the powerless to suffer, they are perpetuating death, maybe not in the physical sense, but definitely in the spiritual sense.

It is not that one is physically dead, but the situation seems to be killing one's energy and spirit. This is a dead and barren place. That place where you are constantly coming to church Sunday after Sunday, helping everyone else's children and your own child has still not come home. Dead places. Maybe it has nothing to do with your

relationship or your finances. Maybe it is that place in your life at this time where you have no joy. Lack of joy is a dying place. The Bible tells us that “the joy of the Lord shall be my strength” (Ps. 28:7). Maybe it is the vicissitudes of life that have expended your energy and your joy and while everyone else is smiling, you are crying uncontrollably, depressingly, for the lack of your joy.

The call of duty of the black church is to serve as the womb of liberation and black theology. Black theology is needed for all, not just for blacks. The intent of black theology is to provide context where differences are met with acceptance and understanding. It is not intended to shame another group and to cause a form of guilt, but rather to expose the shortcomings and evils that allow systems of discrimination and injustice to permeate through society. The purpose is to expose the evil and greed of a self-actualizing existence where unfortunately, white privilege is apparent above all. This desire to be in control is the very concept that BLT challenges. Liberation theology is at its core a theology of understanding and empowerment, not that of isolation. From a standpoint of isolation, progress will not happen. Black liberation theology is a model of self-improvement for all. In terms of social injustice, there will always be one group who desires to control the masses, that is the very nature of human existence, but liberation theology is arguably the theology of inclusion. Hopkins and Thomas states, “Black theology of liberation states that God created this world for humanity. But hubris or selfishness led most of the American white community to steal God’s created order for themselves. Thus, evil in Black theology emphasizes both personal and systemic sin.”⁶

How is systemic sin quantified? Systemic sin can be apparent in many forms. Police brutality is a systemic sin that is perpetuated more against blacks than any other

⁶ Hopkins and Thomas, “Black Theology U.S.A. Revisited,” 62.

group. If one is a member of the black community in America, this reality cannot be solved without the assistance of the very members of the white mainstream who perpetuate the wrongs against blacks. Systemic sin can also be quantified by the disproportionate numbers of blacks who are imprisoned in the criminal justice system

In America there is often a willing tolerance to turn a blind eye to mass incarceration, but is this blind eye reflective of all walks of society? In terms of crime, yes, no one would argue that criminals should not be punished; however, if certain groups disproportionately receive longer sentences for the same crimes, the question must be asked, are we punishing the criminal, or are we punishing the group. Mass incarceration is in and of itself a systemic sin. However, one of the most egregious systemic sins faced by minorities in this country would have to be the systemic nature of economic inequality. That is not to suggest that minorities should be given something, but that is to acknowledge that the very nature of being black in America is a nature of suppression, and because of that suppression, there are economic challenges inherent to the black existence. Particularly, if there has been generational subjugation that some have yet to overcome.

Black liberation theology offers a unique perspective to these circumstances by offering an alternative view to aide in overcoming the systemic obstacles that many blacks face. It offers a roadmap to self-identity and self-determination by helping to first acknowledge that there may be systemic challenges at work. However, there is a duty and responsibility of all blacks to accept these circumstances and stand one with another to fight for positive resolutions to the negative systems at work. Black liberation theology is not a theology of acceptance, but rather a theology of resistance which is essentially what

Christ commands. Christ commands us to love one another, and to stand up for the weak and for the oppressed. If we are to live as true Christians and believers, then we must stand against evil, whether that be evil doctrine, unfair laws, or systemic discrimination.

Discrimination and or unfair treatment is absolutely a dead place, and one can encounter any kind of circumstance of the like. They are strongholds that refuse to allow one to go forward or backwards. They hang on to their every whim and try to keep an individual in a barren deserted land. A dying place has been strategically designed to make one give up. Too many times in the body of Christ, one gets to Egypt, a dying place, a barren place that enslaves them and others tend to give up. Liberation theology tells one to pass through the desert experience, through the wilderness and into Canaan, that place of more than enough, blessings and overflow. Christians have to live through their dying place, even when trouble seems to be at their door, one right after another. Hardships will come, but responsible Christians must face their obstacles and move beyond them in order to prosper.

Black theology speaks to the culture and essence of struggle. It is within the constraints of black theology that an individual has a framework to understand that which for the mainstream may seem incomprehensible. The present trends of black theology “commenced around the 1980’s and are characterized by the growth of a second generation of black theologians, including younger African American thinkers who emphasize an exploration of theology from any and all aspects of black life and, most strikingly, the exciting challenge of womanists (black female religious scholars) who have pressed for a holistic Black theology that integrates race, class, gender, sexual

orientation, and ecological analyses.”⁷ In terms of race and class, these concepts go hand in hand as it relates to economics. It is true that in America, race was the initial determining factor that dictated what social class one would belong; however, in present day America, race is less of a determining factor than class in terms of how well one will progress, economically. It is true that poor people disproportionately experience more hardships whether they are black, or white, so the shaping of American society arguably has shifted from one focused on race to one focused on economics. This does not negate the need for black theology, it only adds to the value placed on black theology as a theology of the oppressed and less a theology of the black race.

Dying places, sometimes become so familiar, that one tends to want to stay in them. A person can allow their self-esteem to be beaten so low that they give up and just rest in that place. In this place, it would not matter who is preaching, singing, praising, or worshipping around them, for this is that place that prevents them from smiling or having any peace. Individuals do not feel like even giving God a “Hallelujah.” It is a hindrance to their walk; people are waiting for them to fail and they feel like they have to go through this all by themselves. Black liberation theology simply suggests that no matter what it is that one may experience, they have to “tie a knot and hold on to the author and finisher of our faith,” especially when they feel like they are in something and no matter what they do it goes wrong every time.

While this theology does account for the wrongs of others committed against blacks, there is such a thing called a self-inflicted wound. Some in the body of Christ are in dying places, not because God designed it, but because they “willfully stepped right into the coffin.” Sometimes people create dying places for themselves; they adopt a

⁷ Hopkins and Thomas, “Black Theology U.S.A. Revisited,” 63.

mentality that they should not have anything or be anything. They accept this desert in their lives that was meant to be a point in the journey, but not the destination. This is again why a theology of black liberation is relevant and necessary. If Christians are to be the inheritance of God, how can we limit God's power by thinking this barren place is all that God has for us? It is in the context of understanding the common struggle that we are able to gain the tools necessary to move beyond where we are and thrive.

From a biblical perspective, it is relevant to recall the story of Paul and Barnabas preaching in Lystra. While Paul was preaching, he came upon a man who had been crippled since birth. Scripture tells us that Paul, "looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed, and called out 'Stand up on your feet!' At that, the man jumped up and began to walk." When the people around them saw this, they began to celebrate Paul and Barnabas, as Grecian gods, instead of acknowledging the one true and only living God. When Paul and Barnabas heard of this, they ripped their clothes and rebuked the people. The Jews [people from their past] came along and convinced the people that Paul should be stoned. They beat him and stoned him to the point where they believed that he was dead. People were glorifying them one day and casting them "to the pits of hell" the next. The same people who celebrated them the day before wanted Paul dead the next day. From a theological standpoint, it is understood that in the Christian journey, there will be times of disappointment and persecution, yet, these trials are only designed to make one stronger. Black liberation theology offers a perspective that accepts persecution, but offers an alternative, overcoming.

As black liberation theology has grown in America, there are many new generation theologians adding to the discourse of liberation ethics seeking to make black

churches and black Christians take seriously the crisis of opportunity and self-image faced by black males. Garth Baker-Fletcher draws lessons from Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and many others to map the black male's journey into new and healthy male space, particularly psychological liberation.⁸ Baker-Fletcher argues:

That such an event of the mind and the spirit involves a movement from EuroAmerican desires to African-focused ways of life, beliefs, and rituals. As a theological ethic, *Xodus* expresses the urgency of contemporary black rap activists regarding the crisis and opportunities for all African American males, but especially black youth as endangered species in the streets.⁹

This is another element of a dying place and black theology would suggest that in order to move beyond this, one has to turn away from the past, but remember the lesson in order to understand the process of overcoming the obstacle. One must decide if they are willing to live, meaning moving beyond that past place, that place where they felt spiritually dead, and move on to the glory that God has for their lives. For when obstacles and pain are released, Romans 8:18 manifests a whole new truth, "for I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us." Then Paul says, "[in the midst of beatings, brutality, rape, molestation, abuse, addictions, trials, tribulations, trouble, depletion, and despair] that all things work together for the good of them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28). The dying place begins to subside when one realizes that God is bigger than this place that they are in and they should give him praise for recovery and restoration.

Although liberation theology was developed and has evolved through an American lens of view, there are parallels all over the world, particularly in South Africa. South Africa

⁸ Hopkins and Thomas, "Black Theology U.S.A. Revisited," 65.

⁹ Hopkins and Thomas, "Black Theology U.S.A. Revisited," 65-66.

is very much a divided community socially, racially, and socioeconomically. The divide in South Africa stems from a need to reclaim the notion of power by those who feel they remain relegated to the social and economic peripheries after over twenty years of democracy.¹⁰ Apartheid was the systemic and legal oppression of black South Africans, which kept them in subjugated positions of powerlessness. It is from this state of powerlessness that the movement of liberation theology began to shape the context of change to come in South Africa.

Though the structure of apartheid ended over twenty years ago, the conditions of apartheid and the apartheid mentality remain as constants in the lives of many blacks who have not risen above the historical implications and limitations of being discriminated against. As it stands today, there is a shift in the theological movement from a theology of liberation to a theology of development. The premise is that although apartheid has been eliminated, the people who have been most affected by the constraints of the system have not progressed. What then has liberation theology to offer? If liberation theology is the theology of the poor, how has it been effective in realizing positive growth and progress in terms of social conditions, economic gains, and class assimilation? What is true during apartheid, is very much true today, blacks in South Africa are still oppressed and there has been a backlash of liberation theology among the clergy. According to Du Toit:

What has not been challenged is perhaps what may be termed the “elephant in the room” – the failure of the church to sufficiently recognize that to engage with

¹⁰ Nadine Bowers Du Toit, “The Elephant in the Room: The Need to RE-Discover the Intersection between Poverty, Powerlessness and Power in ‘Theology and Development’ Praxis,” *Hervormde Theologiese Studies* 72, no. 4 (2016): 1-9, doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i4.3459>, accessed July 13, 2019, <https://login.proxy033.nclive.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/doview/1836000617?accountid=9994>.

poverty, there is a need to engage discourses and practices within ‘theology and development’ with regards to power and powerlessness...this may well be the reason for the churches inability to move beyond these approaches.¹¹

Essentially, what gain is there to discuss poverty and overcoming poverty if there is no discussion of how to develop the individual in a society that rejects the needs of the poor. It is not enough to have programs or doctrine that offer handouts to the poor, but rather, the goal should be to develop the poor by providing them with the resources, means, and access to sustain themselves in a manner where each individual will be able to achieve true growth and prosperity because they have learned the process which enables them to become self-sufficient and self-reliant.

Many critics would argue that the church has done its part to assist the poor in South Africa, but can that be held as true when those who were in power during apartheid are still dictating the economic structure because they have maintained majority control over the resources? As a point of contention, it is true that many blacks are in much better positions under democracy than when they suffered under apartheid, but is suffering still not suffering? If a man suffers from hunger, is he still not suffering if the power structures only give him daily bread, rather than providing him with the resources through education or economics to make his own bread? Poverty in South Africa is still largely a legacy of the structural inequalities of the past. It is a well-publicized fact that, “South Africa has one of the highest inequality rates in the world, and despite the growth

¹¹ Bowers Du Toit, “The Elephant in the Room” 1-9, accessed July 13, 2019, <https://login.proxy033.nclive.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/doview/1836000617?accountid=9994>.

of the black middle class, poverty and inequality remain racially skewed.”¹² On the other hand, there have been policies put in place which attempt to set the wrongs of apartheid right through policies such as Black Economic Empowerment (BEE). The common view of this particular policy change is that many would argue that it has caused a reversed trend of impoverishing whites in order to enrich the black populace. This has led to cultural and identity resistance within public discourse and anger for whites effected under these types of mandated policies. The theology of liberation in many ways is null and void since blacks have been liberated, but what has not happened is the true development of blacks. Where does this leave the church? Do the clergy argue for more liberation, or do they reassess and make an attempt to apply a different theology to address the concerns of the poor?

The concept of loving thy neighbor has not transpired into equality. The concept of poverty is most often viewed as a social issue rather than an issue of justice. This leads to the church’s widespread implementation of relief programs which offer charity or welfare, but this also poses a problem because charity and welfare create dependency, not independence and sustainability. The key problems the South African church faces in addressing the poverty and development problem effectively is “that the mode of involvement, or discourse required to effectively address this challenge has not been

¹² Bowers Du Toit, “The Elephant in the Room,” 1-9, accessed July 13, 2019, <https://login.proxy033.nclive.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/doview/1836000617?accountid=9994>.

sufficiently thought through.”¹³ It is to this end that the theology of development is beginning to take rise over the theology of liberation.

The reason many blacks, whether American or South African are still dwelling “amongst the graves” is because there has not been a holistic expectation from all involved to foster an environment of growth and development. Liberation theology has an important role to play amongst any oppressed groups; however, there has to be a shift from the act of oppression to a duty of responsibility for one’s own development if any theology is to truly reach its ecclesiastical duty. There must be a level of expectation, and action that allows for the theology to recognize what has been, understand what should be, and to pursue what must transpire for any individual to rise above their circumstances. There cannot be progress without recognizing that there is first an individual responsibility to accept the larger context of the societies in which one can operate. There will be opposition to any theology which is perceived to elevate one group over another, but no theology can dominate the discussion of liberation without first acknowledging that there are tough discussions that need to occur.

The theology of liberation does not seek to exalt one group over another, but rather it seeks to give an oppressed group the tools necessary to compete on fair terms. There will always be divisions among people in terms of economics, class, race, politics, gender, sexuality and the like, but liberation theology seeks to first acknowledge those differences, while affirming that those very differences can become tools rather than barriers to empowerment. As one matures in Christ, there should be an expectancy for God to “flex his awesomeness.” For God told us that “he will do a new thing, to watch it

¹³ Bowers Du Toit, “The Elephant in the Room,” 1-9, accessed July 13, 2019, <https://login.proxy033.nclive.org/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/doview/1836000617?accountid=9994>.

spring forth, and the old thing shall pass away” (Is. 43:19). The theology of liberation is not new, but it is indeed relevant and the discourse surrounding the body of the discussion must evolve with the evolution of the societies in which the theology is necessary.

CHAPTER FIVE

INTERDISCIPLINARY FOUNDATIONS

What separates African Methodists from other Methodists is not only the fact of being African. It is also the struggle of being African. This is the same struggle that induced the establishment of these African Methodist denominations. The struggle of African existence in America, along with the culture that came from Africa-constitutes the construction of what is known as African Methodism. This impacts the way liturgy is not only perceived but performed and lived out. The distinguishable marks of worship in African Methodism are different because the life experience of white Methodists and black Methodists are different.

If life experiences of white Methodists and black Methodists are different; it can be assumed that distinguishable marks of liturgical life will be different. That is precisely because worship arises out of culture, and one cannot help but worship in the manner in which culture has cultivated them. In this understanding, the liturgical life, worship practices, styles and function are different with African Methodism. It is not that African Methodists have divorced themselves from traditional Methodist liturgical practices; their practices just tend to take on a different shape. The different shape of this liturgical performance takes root in the African experience in America. It is Methodist liturgy with African American history. That is, the story of Africans in America is shown forth in worship. As suggested by Cone, "Through sermon, song, prayer, and testimony, the

people tell their story of ‘how they got over.’”¹ This is key in understanding the African nature of African Methodism.

The working problem for this chapter is the inability to allow changing times and techniques to sustain healthy and sustainable church growth. Not many congregations embrace the fact that church growth is necessary in order to keep the Kingdom of God moving forward. When nothing happens, then nothing happens, even in the church.

This is not a new problem in this twenty-first century. Many church goers either attend on a regular basis or they visit other churches on a regular basis. Most of them love their churches, but because the church is not growing, they seek spiritual help with a different congregation.

In most cases, a member that is absent from church three Sundays out of a month, if not for personal reasons, may very well be absent for spiritual reasons. In times past, families would remain at their churches for years. They had a family tradition there and it meant something. Today, we live in a millennial society and they do not give as many chances to become spiritually disinterested.

Through the years, churches have always struggled with growth for various reasons. One thing that has helped them to survive is the same thing that helps them today, the Gospel. Preaching is paramount in the church. If the word of God is not strong then the membership will not remain strong. Although the average church goer uses church as a social platform, they still want a word to brag on. It is sad but it is true, the pastor must be fully equipped and there better be some good worship music to introduce his appearance.

¹ James H. Cone, “Black Worship: A Historical Theological Interpretation,” in *Readings in African American Church Music and Worship* (Chicago, IL: Gia Publications, 2014), 160–161.

Yes, the Gospel is what draws men to Christ, but once they are saved there must be a spiritual source to help the members remain and attend faithfully and with great joy. However, if the Holy Spirit does not draw them the preacher cannot. It was once a tradition for families to prepare for Sunday's church attendance on Saturday. Those days are long gone. Parents would begin to iron clothes and if there were girls, their hair was done on Saturday night. Families worshipped together and church lasted all day. The church was a meeting place for generation to generation; there was a Christian heritage and not a religious heritage left behind.

Attendance continues to be one of the most important motives for churches to track as it looks to discern the health of a congregation and whether it is growing. Reports continue to come out indicating that fewer people are attending church. There has been much discussion around the steady decline in church attendance and the big drop in church visitors. Statistics indicates that millennials are leaving the church in droves; but is it true? Is the problem as bad as we are led to believe?

What causes the church not to grow or to attain sustainable growth, if it does grow? We must always consider the people in the pews – the congregants. What are they expecting from the church? If surveys were given, would they have responded to them in a positive way? How do they respond when church growth is mentioned? Do they feel that church growth is the pastor's responsibility, or do they consider it a group effort? What does the pastor think? Does the leader have any ideas or consideration for church growth? Does the leader envision church growth but is too afraid because there is a lack of knowledge in this area?

Gallup surveys dating back to 1948, were able to uncover significant trends in the way Americans identified themselves religiously over the last sixty years (information only exists through 2016). In 1948, 22% of Americans identified as Catholics, in the early 80s that percentage climbed to 29%. By 2016, the percentage was back down to 22%. Four percent of Americans identified as Jewish in 1948, the number dropped to 3% by 2016. In 1948, most Americans (68%) identified themselves as Protestants. This number reached its apex in 1954 and 1956 at a startling 71%. We then see a pretty steady decline until we hit 37% in 2016, an overall drop of 31%. What happened to the Protestants? We know that they did not convert; because there has not been a fluctuation in Catholicism, Judaism or Mormonism. In 1999, Gallup started tracking the denominationally nonspecific Christian affiliation. That has grown from 2% to 10% in 2016, so that might account for some Christians who have jumped from Protestants to a more nonspecific Christian identity. Next to the drop in Protestantism, the most dramatic change is in those who do not identify as regular attenders at all. In 1992, 70% of Americans claimed to be regular attenders of a house of worship, less than twenty-five years later (2016) that number has dropped to 55%.²

Why do people attend their churches? With all that is going on in society today, there are many areas where churches might focus their energy and attention; but how do you decide? Do you base your decision on what you see in the churches around you or do you decide what is important from Christian radio, magazines, books or blogs? It is important that in all we do, we ensure that we are meeting the needs of the congregants of the churches and the citizens of communities that we serve. What are those needs?

² Jayson D. Bradley, "The Ultimate Guide to Understanding and Growing Church Attendance," accessed July 19, 2019, <https://pushpay.com.blog/church-attendance>.

What people are actually looking for are sermons and homilies. People want to learn more about the scriptures, and they want to learn how their religious beliefs intersect with their personal lives. They want spiritual programs aimed at younger people. Families end up at church because they want to expose their children to Christian education. Surprisingly, above music people valued opportunities to volunteer and take part in upcoming outreach. They also want social activities that will help them connect to the people in their communities.

Just as there are people who attend church for particular reasons, there are also those who do not attend for some equally specific reasons. Thankfully, people are “not attending church” because they do not feel welcomed. Quite the contrary, churches welcome visitors with open arms and are generally excited to have visitors. The major reason people avoid church is because they prefer to worship on their own.

Churches must get better at communicating why belonging to a community of faith is better than worshipping alone. It is okay to say that community is better than isolation, but it must be demonstrated. As Jesus says, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn. 13:35 ESV).

Churches should operate in the community in such a way that the community is thankful the church is there. In order to address people’s distaste for organized religion (the second reason why people avoid church), we need to serve the community in a way that makes them thankful we exist. If people feel that the church exist only to get them to attend, behave and contribute they are going to continue to be skeptical of organized religion. To overcome this skepticism, people will have to experience churches that are serving, loving and giving back to their communities.

Gone are the days when people attend church fifty out of the fifty-two Sundays in a year. Even committed attendees are attending church less. Carey Nieuwhof shares ten reasons why church growth is hindered today:

Greater Affluence (money gives people options); Higher Focus on Kids Activities (growing number of kids playing sports and a growing number of parents choosing sports over church); More Travel (even for leisure, more than once a year); Blended and Single Parent Families (shared custody; single parents don't always have transportation, therefore they are forced to miss church); Online Options (can access church without being there, social media); The Cultural Disappearance of Guilt (the number of people feeling guilty about not being in church on Sunday shrinks daily); Self-Directed Spirituality (people are looking less to church and leaders to help them grow spiritually); Failure to See a Direct Benefit (people make time for the things they value most); Valuing Attendance over Engagement (people would rather engage in church, then simply attend church – they want to be involved); A Massive Culture Shift (many of them love their church, but don't mind missing attending).³

There may very well be some truth – even a lot of truth – to what Nieuwhof says; however, the leader (the pastor), must seek direction from God regarding God's vision for the church. For 'without a vision the people perish.' Nieuwhof says and I agree, "I do not believe that you and I can make a church grow, only God can do that. But we can position our church to grow by making a lasting impact on our community with the Gospel."⁴

There is a vast difference in growing a church and sustainable church growth. There is much work to be done when sustainable growth is the goal that is to be accomplished. A vision is birthed, and a plan must be implemented. Leadership teams are formed, and much prayer is needed. It is a high calling, but a vision birthed after

³ Carey Nieuwhof, "Ten Reasons Even Committed Church Attendees are Attending Church Less Often," accessed July 19, 2019, <https://careynieuwhof.com/10-reasons-even-committed-church-attendees-attending-less-often>.

⁴ Nieuwhof, "Ten Reasons Even Committed Church Attendees are Attending Church Less Often," accessed July 19, 2019, <https://careynieuwhof.com/10-reasons-even-committed-church-attendees-attendingless-often>.

consultation with the Lord is most definitely obtainable. Once the vision is birthed the pastor must follow through. Although it is always wise to prepare for obstacles, God is faithful to perform what He has ordained. Nieuwhof shares the following reasons for no church growth, “The Pastor Does All the Work; The Pastoral Care is Out of Order (inexperienced workers); No Team to Build With; Church Leaders Are Burnt Out; No Change!; Lack of Church Engagement; A Better Impact Needed on Millennials; Cultural Trends Are Missing; Structure Bigger to Grow Bigger; Stop Making Excuses.”⁵

Sometimes, things start to look dead then a spark is set under the congregation, which prepares them for the pastor’s vision. God may do things like this because some members are not moved unless they feel as though they had a part in it. So, a spark is set, and the pastor is allowed of God to share his vision for church growth. Though we shared Nieuwhof’s reasons why churches may not grow, each congregation has its list of reasons and the pastor will always have knowledge of them. Although the pastor may not have the experience for the next step to build and grow, he has the Lord to lead him.

It is indeed a blessing when the time comes to walk out the vision that the pastor has for church growth. Being prepared is a key element and there are so many resources and fellow pastors that we can reach out to. It is not about being ashamed but about following through in Jesus’ name! Having a vision is one thing, but casting the vision is another. As Nieuwhof stated there must be a strong team of willing leaders to assist the pastor.

In the *Christianity Today Magazine* dated August 1, 2018, the article “Who Attends Church?” was published and it states:

⁵ Carey Nieuwhof, “Eight Reasons Why Most Churches Never Reach the 200 Attendance Mark,” accessed July 19, 2019, <https://careynieuwhof.com>.

Among United States adults who attend church or other religious services regularly (defined by Pews as attending monthly or more) 7 to 10 say a very important reason they attend is so their children will have moral foundation (69%). Similar sharers attend to become a better person (68%) or for comfort in times of trouble or sorrow (66%). The most common reason for attendance is to become closer to God (81%), which far and away is also cited as the single most important reason (61%), with every other reason cited by less than a tenth of respondents. Pew also examined the demographics of regular worshippers among the findings: 71% pray daily, 56% are women, 55% are age 50 or older, 31% are college students, 45% are Democrats or lean that way.

Pew found that while becoming “closer to God” was the most important reason given for attending church or other religious services regularly, concern for comfort or the character of children or one’s self also ranked high.

Smaller majorities say that valuable sermons and being a part of a community of faith” are very important reasons for their regular attendance. Far fewer cite their family’s religious traditions (37%) or feeling of religious obligations (31%) as reasons for their steady religious attendance, while even fewer say socializing, and meeting new people (19%) or pleasing their spouse or family (16%) are key reasons they attend church regularly.⁶

No one wants to see a church die, yet far too many are. In his book *The Autopsy of a Deceased Church*, Thom S. Rainer lists the following as reasons for church death:

- Slow Erosion
- The Past is the Hero
- The Church Refused to Look Like the Community
- The Budget Moved Inwardly
- The Great Commission Becomes the Great Omission
- The Preference Driven Church
- Pastor’s Tenure Deceases
- The Church Rarely Prayed Together
- The Church Had No Clear Purpose
- The Church Obsessed Over the Facilities
- The churches are diverse in their denominational or non-denominational backgrounds. They are diverse in their locations. They diverse in their local

⁶ Jeremy Weber, “Pew: Why Americans Go to Church or Stay Home,” *Christianity Today*, accessed July 19, 2019, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2018/july/church-attendance-top-reasons-go-or-stay-home-pew.html>.

regional demographics. But they are all similar in one significant way: they followed paths that caused them to die.⁷

Does size of the church affect the growth of the church? Research indicates that small churches struggle to grow because of the people they attract. Compared to mid-size (300-999 adults) and large churches (1000 or more adults), small churches (100 or fewer adults) are more likely to draw people who are not college graduates and are more likely to appeal to people with lower household incomes. The study suggested that a “downscale” demographic profile often correlates with less aggressive growth patterns in organizations and a limited number of effective leaders. Adults under the age of thirty-five years are more likely to attend small churches. The dominant reason for this pattern is the relative absence of children among younger adults. A second reason relates to the baby buster generation’s distrust in participating in boomer-led organizations and large-scale enterprises. Busters are more interested in being personally known and connected, which is believed to be more difficult to accomplish in larger churches.

The research also has some theological limitations – that is, their spiritual beliefs and practices reflect challenges that are less prevalent in larger congregations. Small churches have a lower proportion of attenders who are “spiritually active.” That is to say, they attend a church service, read the Bible, and pray to God during a typical week.

Demographically, mid-sized and larger churches attract a higher proportion of adults whose education and income levels enable the church to take more risks, be more aggressive in marketing, and draw resources from deeper pockets and broader backgrounds. Adults attending mid-sized and large churches are more often people who are conservative in their theology as well as their social and political values.

⁷ Thom S. Rainer, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church* (Nashville, TN: B and H Publishing Group, 2014), 7.

However, small churches play an important and valuable role in the landscape of America. It is most definitely a fact that small churches are just as vital in a community as a large church. After all the Lord has a plan for all churches that have a desire to reach souls for Him, be it large or small.

Churches fail to grow for various reasons; the reasons vary according to the vision of the leader. In some cases, it can be that the leader is ready to grow the congregation, but spiritual obstacles hinder the growth. Here are a few of the reasons noted over the several years of pastoring. Churches are stuck in traditions. They are not hearing the needs of the community as well as current church goers. Churches are not meeting the needs of those who work and must worship outside of the normal worship hour. Finally, churches offer too few outward focused ministries.

What do we mean when we say “Church?” We hear or use such expressions as: “There is no salvation outside the Church,” “The Roman Catholic Church,” “The Church is the Body of Christ.” “I go to Church,” all contain the term “Church,” but obviously in a very inconsistent way. Ecclesiology is the branch of theology that deals with the study of the church. What is the church? What are its functions? Is it visible, invisible, or both? These are the questions discussed in the field. The root of ecclesiology is the Greek word *ekklesia*, which is translated “church.”

We understand that properly speaking, the word “church” refers to people, not a building. The church proclaims the Gospel of Christ and spreads His message across the world to all peoples. The church is tasked to be a beacon of hope, and all who enter through her doors are taught the ways of salvation. Just how the church does this is subject of debate. In 1 Timothy 3:15, Paul calls the church to be the foundation and pillar

of truth. In the article “Ecclesiology and the Four Marks of the Church,” William Hemsworth says, “The church is categorized by four marks of being *One Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic*.”⁸

The first quality of the church is that it is one. One is more than just a number; it also conveys unity. Within the church, people have many gifts. Every gift that a person possesses is useful in the building up of the church. The people in the body of Christ come together to build one another up. The second is the quality of the church is that it is holy. The church is holy based on the Jesus Christ who is its founder. The church is made holy, by virtue of its call and mission (1 Cor. 1:2). The church is made up of sinners who, by the grace of God, carry out the great commission. The third quality of the church is that it is catholic. The church is universal. It is not a church just for the Jews and Gentiles, but for all people – rich, poor, free, black, white, etc. We are all God’s children. The fourth quality of the church is that it is apostolic. It is apostolic because the apostles were given the authority from Christ to establish it. The church was built on the foundation of the Apostles.

Just as discussed, the struggle with growth and with maintaining sustainable growth in churches once they begin to grow, (and we have highlighted the qualities of the church), we must also discuss methods of growth and growing. “Between 6,000 and 10,000 churches in the U.S. are dying each year. That means around 100-200 churches

⁸ William Hemsworth, “Ecclesiology and the Four Marks of the Church,” Catholic Exchange, last modified September 14, 2017, accessed April 10, 2020, <https://catholicexchange.com/ecclesiology-four-marks>.

will close this week. The pace will accelerate unless our congregations make some dramatic changes.”⁹

When one witnesses such statistics, they want to cast blame – politics, the internet, and or the millennials. Perhaps, instead of focusing on the problem of why churches are closing, we should try to learn from models that are thriving. The models are the Dinner Church, the Thriving Church, the Underground Network, the Blended Ecology, the Grace Church and the Campus and Community Ministry.

Dinner Church

Verlon Fosner tells the story of how his traditional Pentecostal Church went from dying of attrition to being reborn as a network of 12 (and counting) community dinners. These communities are aimed at those that likely would never come to a Sunday gathering either because of work scheduling or the cultural, and often social economic distance.” Dinner Church is inspired by Jesus’ words in Revelation 3:20, “Behold I stand at the door and knock. If any man hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.” As Fosner says, “The only question remains is “Who is going to set the table?” Could it be that setting a table for sinners, seculars, and strangers, to have dinner with Jesus might be one of the great callings of the church? What if when Jesus was telling Peter to “feed His sheep” He wasn’t speaking metaphorically but was directing him to a physical table?”

Verlon and Melodee Fosner are the founders of Community Dinners and the Dinner Church Collective. These are generally located in what he refers to as “sore neighborhoods” usually made up of “the lower third,” or the third of the population that earns below a middle class income. They meet in a community center and other common gathering places. Not only do dinner churches reach different people but compared to traditional approaches they’re cheap. According to Fosner, one dinner church is being opened a week. Non-staffing expenses (food and rent) generally runs about \$1000.00/monthly.¹⁰

⁹ Chris Morton, “Churches are Closing: These Four Models are Thriving,” Missio Alliance, accessed July 19, 2019, <https://www.missioalliance.org/author/chrismorton>.

¹⁰ Morton, “Churches are Closing,” accessed July 19, 2019, <https://www.missioalliance.org/author/chrismorton>.

As we can see this is what the ministry of Jesus is all about, doing as the Lord leads to keep the doors of a church open. If we but try, the Lord always provides. As consider another 'Thriving Church' each one has its own plan that the Lord has given as to how the Gospel can be shared.

Thriving Churches

Senior Pastor Michael Fletcher of Manna Church in Fayetteville, North Carolina shares from an article in the *Fayetteville Observer*, "Christianity is a message, it's a lifestyle.... This is how you allow your work to go before you." Pastor Fletcher also stated, "We Do Three Things - Love God, Love Each Other, and Love the World."¹¹

Pastor Fletcher's concepts and or visions toward thriving and helping the communities thrive are helping God's people discover and develop their gifts and to glorify God by equipping God's people to change their world by the planting churches locally and abroad with the same world-changing vision. Under his leadership one hundred churches have been planted to date. He has faithfully served the Manna Church for over thirty years. The vision of Manna Church as stated by Pastor Fletcher, "To plant a version of Manna Church near every US Military Base in the world."¹²

What an encouragement to know that no matter the demographics the Lord has souls in place for all churches to reach. It is very important to always continue in prayer and whenever possible to reach out to other leaders for encouragement and help, that churches are not closed.

¹¹ Michael Futch, "Would Your Community Miss You? Asks Manna Church Pastor Fletcher," *Fayetteville Observer*, October 29, 2016.

¹² Futch, "Would Your Community Miss You?"

Dr. Michael Brodeur shares from the Website: [www. PastorCoach.com](http://www.PastorCoach.com) and the publication “How to Build A Thriving Church,” “every leader must be connected to the source to have a thriving church.”¹³ Brodeur indicates that in order for the church to thrive there must be the following:

- A Thriving Leader
 - Spiritual Life
 - Home Life
 - Destiny Sync
 - Mentors

- A Thriving Team
 - Care Team
 - Leadership Team
 - Team Alignment
 - Team Momentum

- A Thriving Mission
 - Mandate
 - Motivation
 - Mobilization and Movement

- A Thriving Culture
 - Values
 - Priorities
 - Practices
 - Personnel

- Thriving Members
 - Every Member Ministry
 - Kingdom Lifestyle
 - Destiny Discovery
 - Church Ministry
 - Marketplace Ministry

¹³ Michael Brodeur, “How to Build a Thriving Church – Notes,” Pastors Coach, accessed July 19, 2019, <https://www.PastorsCoach.com>.

Again, Every Leader Must Be Connected to the Source!¹⁴

What a powerful outline. It is evident that the rise and fall of a church is totally dependent upon the leader of the church. There are far too many tools in the church growth toolbox for us not to experience great growth and sustain that growth.

The Thriving Church

The final “Thriving Church” is reflected by Ed Stetzer shared on MGBlog, March 2017 “The Thriving Smaller Church”

The reality is that smaller churches can thrive, too. More than 65 percent of the churches that participated in the research for Comeback Churches had under 200 regular attendees, smaller churches are not always unhealthy churches; it depends largely on their mindset. In our research, we find that small churches which experience revelation often did so around prayer for renewal, and outreach.¹⁵

Smaller churches rated two areas that changed the most during the comeback: 1.) passionate persistent prayer smaller comeback churches believe that real, intentional, strategic prayer made a significant difference in their revitalization process; 2.) an outward focus-smaller churches are not exempt from the call to reach people because they are small. They must focus their attention on reaching the lost in their communities.

There is nothing revolutionary about prayer and outreach, but they do change our focus. When trying to be like the large church, small church leaders have often found that the results are not positive. However, when they set the attention on God through prayers

¹⁴ Brodeur, “How to Build a Thriving Church,” accessed July 19, 2019, <https://www.PastorsCoach.com>.

¹⁵ Ed Stetzer, “The Thriving Smaller Church” (blog), March 7, 2017, accessed July 19, 2019, <https://edstetzer.com/2017/03/the-thriving-smaller-church>.

and on their community through outreach, the right focus produces larger churches using God's mission, and that is worth celebrating.

The Underground Network

The Underground Network originated in Tampa Bay, Florida, and is comprised of over 200 local micro churches. It includes simple church engaging in worship, community and mission, as well as a platform of services that launch and serve these and other micro churches.

The Underground spends the majority of its time, resources, energy, and programming in creating and sustaining a fellowship of missional leaders – leaders who embrace the posture, thinking, behavior, and practices of a missionary in order to reach others with the message of the Gospel. These leaders are treated as church planters, who have the freedom to govern themselves and control their own affairs based on the needs of the community.¹⁶ Some of the micro churches that are a part of the fellowship include:

- The Well: A group dedicated to creating spaces in which to forge community with the poor. This includes a weekly meal, affordable groceries, community meals, a mobile unit distributing material goods, and a bicycle co-op.
- Flourish: A community where nurses and healthcare workers come to be loved, encouraged, empowered, and sent out to be the hands and feet of Jesus in their profession.
- Burning Bush: a network of artists and creative professionals serving and helping each other play their part in the body in ushering an era of intentional, missional diversity and creativity within the community.¹⁷

¹⁶ Morton, "Churches are Closing," Missio Alliance, accessed July 19, 2019, <https://www.missioalliance.org/author/chrismorton>.

¹⁷ Morton, "Churches are Closing," accessed July 19, 2019, <https://www.missioalliance.org/author/chrismorton>.

When asked why Underground is thriving, Lucas Pulley, Director of Tampa Underground Network, says: “We are an entirely calling-driven network, with a thick theology and culture of calling with no room for consumers or spectators. The Underground does not start ministries, we only react to launch and serve leaders who are called by Jesus, believing in and activating the priesthood of all believers.” The result is a community of “called leaders” who are “more passionate, creative, and resilient than recruited volunteers.”¹⁸

Part of the appeal is generational. According to Pulley, attractional forms of church which had been effective for boomers and Gen X fail to address the disillusionment millennials and Gen Z feel with consumer freedom or their desire for meaning and community.

There is also the growth of “creator economy,” often fueled by the new possibilities provided by the internet, which has created an explosion of entrepreneurial energy in broader culture. The Underground believe this means that the Church should respond by giving even more room for “apostolic gifting and mass empowerment!” According to Pulley: “The best people to serve and lead [within] a certain population are those ‘on the ground’ with the freedom to contextualize, resulting in the eradication of hierarchical operating structures.”¹⁹ While these approaches are useful today, Pulley is quick to point out:

The Underground is built to adjust and adapt to any cultural moment, not just 2019 but 2030, as well. Because we’ve embraced a very simple definition of Church (minimal ecclesiology) and made powerful church planting and church leadership accessible to every single person in every place, the city-wide network is wired to rapidly adjust and contextualize to a rapidly changing world.”²⁰

¹⁸ Morton, “Churches are Closing,” accessed July 19, 2019, <https://www.missioalliance.org/author/chrismorton>.

¹⁹ Morton, “Churches are Closing,” accessed July 19, 2019, <https://www.missioalliance.org/author/chrismorton>.

²⁰ Morton, “Churches are Closing,” accessed July 19, 2019, <https://www.missioalliance.org/author/chrismorton>.

The Blended Ecology - Wildwood

When Michael Beck arrived at Wildwood United Methodist Church in Central Florida, there was not much left. A handful of octogenarians “senior saints” were keeping the lights running, but not much else. Inspired by John Wesley’s call to “make the world his parish,” Beck cast a vision that they would not just gather among themselves, but they would find ways to be the church within the community. Three years later, 300 people were attending Sunday morning’s meeting in three vastly different and diverse gatherings.

Besides Sundays, there are fifteen fresh expressions of church, such as smaller, contextual gatherings in dog parks, tattoo parlors, and running trails.

Beck refers to this new organism growing out of his old Methodist church as a “blended ecology.” The church was originally driven by a “single economy,” revolving primarily around the inherited Sunday liturgical gathering. As they multiplied into various fresh expressions throughout their community, the church became a “mixed economy” with a traditional gathering and satellites. As this approach has matured, both forms, the inherited church and fresh expressions, have grown into a single “blended ecology” where different forms serve and enrich each other. When asked why his church is thriving, Beck is quick to point to the “pioneers:” the apostolic leaders working to start new forms of Church. Whereas many pioneering leaders find themselves frustrated in traditional models of Church, pioneers within a blended ecology “have turned their common passions and practices into new forms of church.”²¹

Grace Church

Another story of blended ecology comes from Grace Church in Cape Coral, Florida. According to Senior Pastor Jorge Acevedo: “The church has been on a 22+ year journey figuring out how to join Jesus in his mission in the world. In the earliest days, it

²¹ Morton, “Churches are Closing,” accessed July 19, 2019, <https://www.missionalliance.org/author/chris Morton>.

was simply innovating around worship, student, children's, mission's ministry. Today, it's figuring how to do ministry in Athens instead of Jerusalem ... We were red hot to reach our community with more than just worship and discipleship opportunities. Our congregation has been profoundly outwardly focused in our ministry to the poor, marginalized and addicted of our community.”²²

With the economic downturn in 2007, Grace Church felt the need to transition from a “come to” church to a “go to” church as they had more and more opportunity to serve their neighbors’ tangible needs. Though they served hundreds of thousands of people, few of those served had assimilated into the church. However, after the economy recovered people used their newly revived incomes for weekend hobbies and vacations.²³ Realizing that they were not really innovators but rather early adapters, Grace Church committed to learning from missional endeavors in the U.K. and the U.S., and so repurposed their existing space for different types of ministry. Their ministry efforts embody three core values: being unashamedly God-centered, passionately people focused, and strategically team-based.

Beck’s “pioneers” and Acevedo’s APEs (apostles, prophets and evangelists) empower us to move toward a blended ecology and to start new forms of church. Groundbreaking, innovative, revolutionary leaders are often frustrated within the traditional models of church, while within a blended ecology their common passion and

²² Morton, “Churches are Closing,” accessed July 19, 2019, <https://www.missionalliance.org/author/chrismorton>.

²³ Morton, “Churches are Closing,” accessed July 19, 2019, <https://www.missionalliance.org/author/chrismorton>.

practices are turned into new forms of church. Within the blended ecology they are fully released as the ‘priesthood of all believers.’²⁴

Recently, a staff member at Grace Church asked Acevedo for “permission to be gone on Sunday mornings and go and see where “Aslan is on the move.” While this meant a core team member was away for their major attractional moment of the week, the result was something new, in a new space, with new people. That staff person now meets on Sundays in a mostly Spanish-speaking flea market, where they pray and minister to mostly young, poor Latinos who otherwise might never have found their church community.²⁵

Campus and Community Ministry - The Center for Faith and Leadership

The denominational campus ministry center is struggling to maintain its place in a changing culture. Campus ministry groups have long provided a place of connection between like-minded students with similar backgrounds. However, today’s students rarely identify with a specific denomination or any church at all forcing these groups to reimagine their identity.

The Center for Faith and Leadership (renamed in 2012, formerly the Baptist Student Union at the University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg, Virginia) has expanded their scope to include the needs of their surrounding community. Directors Carey and Gannon Sims, practice an open-door policy – front door opens to the campus, and back door opens to the community.²⁶

The result has been to create an atmosphere which encourages students and young adults to use their creativity to serve others and to seek new means to connect

²⁴ Morton, “Churches are Closing,” accessed July 19, 2019, <https://www.missioalliance.org/author/chrismorton>.

²⁵ Morton, “Churches are Closing,” accessed July 19, 2019, <https://www.missioalliance.org/author/chrismorton>.

²⁶ Morton, “Churches are Closing,” accessed July 19, 2019, <https://www.missioalliance.org/author/chrismorton>.

with their neighbors. They use the language of “research and development” to encourage an environment of experimentation. Some of their experiments, many of which have been instigated, designed, and led by students, include:

- Link: A mentoring community for homeless youth.
- Will’s Place: A local food truck and catering business that got its start during a weekly meal for students and young adults.
- Uptick Entrepreneur: A nine-month discipleship experience and monthly meet-up that brings together local business owners and aspiring young entrepreneurs who desire to impact their community through local enterprise.

Despite all of their activity, the methodology remains relational. “The Center is a place where friendships rooted in Jesus are changing the world,” says Gannon Sims. “We’re thriving because of a constant focus on friendships rooted in Jesus, and our values of mutuality, intentionality, and hospitality in relationships reflect this.”

Luke Taylor, Ministry Associate at the Center, believes that there are many people who want nothing to do with church and others who are never going to be attracted to the sermon-centric approach to most churches. Instead, “the Center is recreating church for the way they need it. It is by no means trying to take the place of church, but it is meeting people where they’re at and inviting Jesus into that place.”²⁷

Although times are changing, we can see that the opportunity for churches to remain open are still there. A pastor must have a heart willing to follow wherever and however the Lord leads to help the church grow and maintain that growth. In looking at the churches that are thriving, one noticed that they are striving because they have outreach for their people.

Yes, it takes work and lots of it to continue to reach people week in and week out, but the Lord will provide all that is needed for those who are willing to serve. We must be ready to help our fellow brethren, not by example only but by extending a hand to help

²⁷ Morton, “Churches are Closing,” accessed July 19, 2019, <https://www.missioalliance.org/author/chrismorton>.

each ministry to move from a “Struggling to a Thriving Church.” Galatians 6:9, “And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.”

CHAPTER SIX

PROJECT ANALYSIS

This project, “Overcoming Obstacles that Hinder Sustainable Church,” is a work that embodied the research of practiced principles discovered in my research and my journey on church growth. Church growth is achievable, but it does not come easy. The truth of the matter is church growth is planned, deliberate, purposed, nurtured and must be maintained. This project evolved out of my own personal experiences of lessons learned about how to maintain sustainable church growth. In addition, leaders of the Fayetteville area churches felt stifled because of the lack of uncertainty in their ability of how to overcome personal obstacles and adversities regarding church growth. This project began with a hypothesis that if and when leaders follow the methods of the teachings of this project and share the knowledge with their members, it will create a greater awareness of how to overcome obstacles and maintain sustainable church growth. This project sought relative information through a descriptive qualitative research methodology.

One expressed goal of this project was that through my lessons learned about church growth the participants gained an understanding of the teachings I shared with them that will help them recognize obstacles that hinder church growth. The second goal of this study was to have pastors and ministers across denominations, through focus group discussion, through participant observation, survey responses (pre and post), and

pastoral and ministry questionnaires would gain knowledge of and implement the principles that will help them to overcome obstacles, gain and maintain church growth. The third expressed goal of this study was for participants to take their new knowledge and share this information with other pastors who are struggling with church growth as a means of having an impact beyond their physical location.

Methodology

For this project, the usage of descriptive qualitative research design was employed. This research design was chosen because of the benefits that can be used for background investigation of a research problem and using that information to carry the research further. It focuses on answering the how, what, when and where of a research problem and less about the why. Descriptive qualitative research approach uses multimethod approach such as case studies, observational focus groups, and surveys. Descriptive qualitative is a distinct method of naturalistic inquiry that utilizes everyday language and low inference interpretation.¹ The main goal of descriptive qualitative is interpretive validity and description. It seeks to understand the multifaceted experiences, events, or processes entrenched within the human context (Sullivan-Bolyai, Bova and Harper, 2005).² An important piece of the interview is participant observation. Morse states, "Body language, nonverbal cues, and voice inflection are all important signs to

¹ Margarete Sandelowski, "Focus on Research Methods: What Happened to Qualitative Descriptions?" *Research in Nursing and Health* 23 (2000): 330-340.

² S. Sullivan-Bolyai, C. Bova, and D. Harper, "Developing and Refining interventions in Person with Health Disparities: The Use of Qualitative Description," *Nurse Outlook* 53, no. 3 (May-June 2005): 127-33.

take note of from the participants. Fieldnotes are also used to record the participants' actions and emotions and to describe what the researcher is feeling and thinking" (2005).³

Of all the tenets of descriptive qualitative research the data collection point in this project that revealed the most validity for this project was the case study. According to Simons, "Furthermore, a case study is a "comprehensive description of an individual case and its analysis."⁴ A case study is usually of a smaller number.

For this project, the case study consisted of three pastors, with one representing the larger sample of eighteen. In addition, to the descriptive research design, multiple forms of data were used in this qualitative study. Data collected, as mentioned earlier, comes in the form of observational method, case study method, and survey research. For this project data was collected via surveys (pre and post), interviews, and case study discussion groups were used to triangulate data. According to Patton, triangulation refers to the use of multiple methods or data sources in qualitative research to develop a comprehensive understanding of phenomena (1999).⁵

My role in this descriptive qualitative study fits into these few basic characteristics. First by conducting the study at church, it satisfies the characteristics of a natural setting. Church is the context by which the participants experienced the issues associated with the problem. The face-to-face interaction was a critical component of the study. This study thoroughly conformed to this characteristic since I gathered all the information and interpretation of data in concert with professional associates. For this

³ Janice M. Morse, "What is Qualitative Research?" Sage Journals, accessed April 24, 2020, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1049732305279135>.

⁴ H. Simons, *Case Study Research in Practice* (London, UK: SAGE, 2009).

⁵ M. Q. Patton, "Enhancing the Quality and Credibility of Qualitative Analysis," *Health Services Research* 34, no. 5 (1999).

project, audiovisual information was not used. All other forms were used and provided the participants an opportunity to express themselves without restrictions to their ideas and involvement. The multiple sources of data provided enough data to organize and cross-reference a thorough analysis of the project.

Another basic characteristic of qualitative research that assisted in establishing all-inclusive set suppositions is inductive and deductive data analysis. When utilizing qualitative research, often time the inductive process demonstrates a back and forth between themes and collected data. The back and forth review are beneficial because it creates an opportunity to support the themes and or gather research.⁶

Author's Role and Attributes

Like most methodologies, there is a role for the researcher in qualitative design. The researcher's role requires them to comment on the design of the study, the overall data collection, define their role in the study and any personal reflections. As stated earlier, several roles as identified by Creswell have already been stated. Creswell asserts, "Qualitative research is interpretative research, the inquirer is typically involved in sustained and intensive experience with participants. This introduces as range of strategic, ethical, and personal issues into the qualitative research process."⁷ In other words, the role of the researcher can have stipulations that apply to their particular context and to themselves. The stipulations for this project apply to the religious entities denominations nuance of an itinerant system that can be an even greater obstacle to

⁶ John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2018).

⁷ Creswell and Creswell, *Research Design*.

church growth. I am an exception to the rule among many. I was able to stay in the context as well as some of the participants, it gave me a better understanding of the concept and helped strengthen my teachings of this concept.

In addition to understanding the context, it is important to be aware of the connections between me and the participants. This is necessary because I did not want to allow my teachings to influence the findings and explanations. When one studies their own context, it can lead to compromise in the author's ability to unveil evidence. However, in this study, my efforts to gain the participants trust and availing research protocol to participants throughout the project assisted with putting at ease any concerns related to my roles as the researcher and participants.

To further expound on the data collection, it is important to note that descriptive qualitative research design involves the use of open-ended interviews. Data analysis should go beyond simply counting words or phrases, but really seek to understand and classify large amounts of text into categories that represent similar meaning.⁸ For this project, the data analysis technique that was created by Miles and Huberman was given consideration and some parts used were:

- Identified similar phrases, themes, and patterns
- Searching for similarities in and across the data
- Generalizations about data were made
- Surveys and notes collected were coded for ease during interpretation⁹

⁸ Hsiu-Fang Hsieh and Sarah E. Shannon, "Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis," Sage Journals, accessed April 24, 2019, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1049732305276687>.

⁹ M. B. Miles and A. M. Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 1994).

Data collected was analyzed immediately after the pre-survey was collected and the same throughout the remainder of the process.

In addition to how data is collected, another aspect of qualitative study is the importance of trustworthiness. According to Lincoln and Guba, to establish trustworthiness, the researcher must ask, “How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences (including self) that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to?”¹⁰ Techniques described by Lincoln and Guba were used to augment and document the data quality for this study. As noted by Lincoln and Guba there are four steps to evaluating trustworthiness: credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability.

Credibility is known as the confidence the researcher has about the truth about what they will find. This is the first step. In this project, credibility was displayed most during the group discussion. Throughout the discussion, the participants responded with resounding similar responses to most of the questions. The second step focused on assuring that the findings are consistent and could be repeated if another researcher used the same study design and participants.

Confirmability, as the third step, is non-biases and results are shaped by the participants and not the researcher. The final step is transferability which means the findings can be transferred to a similar group. Of these four steps this is not a goal of qualitative research. These data collected through a qualitative descriptive approach are a rich, thick description of the experience in question rather than deep, interpretive details and may not be transferable to other situations.¹¹

¹⁰ Y. S. Lincoln and E. G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE, 1985), 209.

¹¹ Sandelowski, “Focus on Research Methods,” 330-340.

In addition to the procedures for data collection to ensure non-biases in the project, I was careful of reflexivity. Reflexivity is defined as the researcher's ability to recognize that his/her background and experience may affect the research.¹² This can easily be displayed in the project by the methods used, the topic of investigation, and conclusions around the topic. My current position as a pastor, my experiences, and observations had to be considered throughout the project. The expectations of the participants and their voluntary consent to participate in this study was defined in the Human Research Subject Consent Form. The form clearly stated the expectations of the project and explained how the information would be used. The form also clarified the risks and benefits of the study. The participants were not coerced, and they understood by providing the information they would not be placed at risk and that complete anonymity would be maintained. My experience with the context and as a pastor who has sustained church growth offered a significant level of credibility to the project. Although this could negatively affect the results, positively it could influence the results because of my passion for the work and the need my work has generated.

Implementation

The methodology of this project used descriptive qualitative research design to address the hypothesis. The implementation of the project followed the project proposal as submitted. The project consisted of twenty-one participants from the Fayetteville, North Carolina area in Cumberland County and from the Raleigh Research Triangle Park area. Eighteen of the twenty-one participants were used to gather the background

¹² Kristi Malterud, "Qualitative Research: Standards, Challenges, and Guidelines," *Lancet* 358, no. 9280 (August 11, 2001): 483-8.

information. The background information was used during the case study sessions. Three persons participated in the case study, one of the three had also participated in the larger group of eighteen.

Data collected from the eighteen pastors came from pre and post surveys and from their participation during the four-hour training session, which I will refer to as the One Day Intensive Session. The three participants in the case study sessions, which I will refer to as the Six Focus Sessions, were from the Research Triangle Park area, which is in close proximity of Cumberland County. Aside from location, the context of church denomination was considered for this project. Nineteen participants were a part of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion denomination with itinerant appointments, and the other two from different denominations. One was a part of Baptist denomination, and the other was a part of nondenominational context.

The project had an expectation of confidentiality between all participants. The participants would not be identified by name, not by church name, nor would they be identified by the location of the church. All identities were undetectable and there was no fear of retribution or judgement. The Human Research Subject Consent Form clearly identified this expectation and safety procedure.

The starting point for the interaction project was recruiting pastors who were willing to share how they envision church growth. Through pre-survey, focus group discussion, ministry questionnaires and post-survey the obstacles that hindered sustainable church growth were identified. Potential participants were invited to share in this project through a formal letter of invitation dated May 31, 2019. Affirmative responses were received from each of the invited participants by September 30, 2019.

The participants were contacted by telephone and invited to a pre-project luncheon scheduled for October 20, 2019 at Simon Temple A.M.E. Zion Church.

One Day Intensive Session and Six Focus Sessions

The eighteen pastors in the Fayetteville area participated in a four-hour session held on July 13, 2019, where they took a pre and post survey. This group was used to determine information for further investigation of the problem. The focus group, which was the three case study participants, met in six sessions over a four-month period on the following dates: November 2, 2019, November 19, 2019, December 16, 2019, January 13, 2020, January 30, 2020, and February 7, 2020. Each session began and ended with prayer.

On July 13, 2019, the eighteen pastors that represented the Fayetteville area churches were informed of the study, provided consent forms for the study, participated in a four-hour training session on the teachings about church growth and how to remove and overcome obstacles to maintain sustainability. The session began with a statement about the purpose of the study and gratitude for their participation. Afterwards the participants were given a pre-survey. I removed myself from this part of the session and my assistant administered the surveys. The pre-surveys were collected and placed in a sealed envelope with the label pre-surveys. After the survey, we engaged in an interactive presentation on the best practices relating to church growth. I facilitated this session. The following teachings were presented during the presentation.

One Day Intensive Session: Chapter 1 - Overcoming Traditional Customs

There is never an easy approach when a pastor has to deal with traditional customs, especially if a great amount are older members. Many times, it is maybe only three of them but when they are bound and determined to push against change; it will be hard. The word of God is the only thing that can plow up stony grounds. There is no use of trying to get to the strongest of the group or the weakest. Only the word and compassion will bring about peaceable change.

It does not hurt to have a plan to meet with the group to try and have a rapport with them. I strongly suggest this for a smoother church transition. It is never good or right to allow them to feel that they do not have a voice even though they have not a choice. There have been cases where this was done in a church and the outcome was positive. The fact is that not often do they leave the church because it has been a part of their lives for many years. As the pastor, we should not have a desire for them to leave. If it gets to the point of confusion that cannot be helped, most times, that person or persons will depart the church.

There is always a biblical answer for any problem in the church. Traditionalism took place in the Bible as well. They were observing days and months for no reason, Jesus said, "By your traditions you have made the word of none effect" (Mk. 7:13). Some members will respond to the saying "When you know better, you do better." Thank God that we overcame traditional customs and we are able to worship together in unity as a congregation. No one wants to see grandma die, but she cannot live forever. However, the tradition of her faithfulness can. That is what must be pointed out to generational

families. We are not removing the ancient landmark, but we are making it look more modern.

One Day Intensive Session: Chapter Two - Moving from Church Mentality to Spiritual Mentality

There is a vast difference between coming to church and being a part of church. Many people do not understand the importance of attending church to make an exchange. Before we enter, we should pray that we receive from God through the word what we need spiritually.

When the doors of the church are open, if possible, members should be there. The more they hear from the word of God, the stronger they should become. A part of sustainable church growth is to keep the church full no matter what is going on. Communication is very important as well, getting announcements out ahead of time makes a great way to have everyone informed in a timely matter. A church yearly calendar is another great tool to have available for members, finding out information and church events at the last minute is never tasteful.

If there are annual events, they do not have to be available at the beginning of the new year. This teaches the congregation organization as well as the church support teams. There will be oversight, but good organization of events should be a normal procedure. This all ties in with spiritual mentality, training the brain to be fully engaged and prayed up when coming to church. When members realize that their spiritual and personal intellect is being challenged and matured, it gives a desire to readily attend church

faithfully. Sustainable growth comes with being taught spiritual mentality. We cannot assume that all persons know this because they may not.

When this is taught, it creates a well-rounded Christian that can be used in ministries, to help others and to reproduce themselves. It prepares the members for the next level of ministry and reinforces their confidence to become a part of outreach.

One Day Intensive Session: Chapter Three - Moved from Membership to Discipleship

As the pastor, it was important for me to have a good support team that understands my leadership and in return, they have great followership abilities. These group leaders are to be an example to the congregation and faithful attenders of church. They are key to preparing a strong discipleship program, one that helps build good Christian character for the attenders. It is always interesting to find that many members have never attended a program that helps to enhance their biblical knowledge. They must be informed of these programs and encouraged to attend them.

Discipleship ministries are designed to be a continuous part of the church's yearly calendar. It is just what it is called a ministry and can be a great measuring tool for church growth. It affords the pastor and his leadership team insight on future leaders and their level of commitment. It is helpful when this ministry has a goal in place as far as the length and the number of classes needed for different areas of service. When one session of the class is completed, a certificate should be awarded. This encourages the persons from the class to continue.

One blessing for our church was the military base, it was not far from us and soldiers are already trained with disciple. That was like having half of the battle

completed, because they know the importance of accountability and teamwork. The transformation of spiritual mentality and discipleship went hand in hand for them.

One Day Intensive Session: Chapter Four - Implementing Small Group Ministry

Breaking down the dynamics of the congregation is important to creating ministries as well. Some ministries should be gender neutral while others should not. Age is also a key component to a successful small group. Small groups can give a more intimate spiritual environment to both new and old Christians. Those that lead these groups should have certain criteria to meet, these should be requirements that the pastor would want to see in the small group leaders. Not every Christian is equipped to lead small groups. Even some seasoned Christians are not well fitted for leadership in this area.

Small groups can become valuable ministries to reach out to unchurched people that would normally attend a church and not a mega church. Sustainability is the mission in all church ministries because the more they attend the more of the word they hear and become stronger Christians. The goal is to always, always reproduce Christians, developing a team with this mindset makes a spiritual productive church.

Numbers are important in the local church but numbers for accountability of church records only. Souls are the heart of the church and should always take precedence over numbers. We must remember that Christians and non-Christian visitors will always be key. If they have a negative experience in either area they may not return if they are visiting.

Small groups are also great helps for the pastor whether it is a mega church or not, because if there is sickness or other issues in a person's life, it will more than likely be discussed in a small group setting. These groups should have activities going on in and outside the church, going outside of the church allows others to be invited to attend. These groups should also have a designated time before another cycle is started. This prevents the ministry from becoming cliquish. It also allows a time of refreshing for the leaders. It is also wise to have a small group established for the leaders, where the pastor visits but maybe has an associate pastor as the lead person. This helps to build a strong foundation for all that are involved.

One Day Intensive Session: Chapter Five - Breaking the Stronghold of Officers that Stayed in Office

This is an issue that every pastor has experienced, the member that wants to hold their position for a lifetime. Some members are amazing at what they do; and it would seem tempting to have them remain in the positions simply because they serve well. This does not help the leader nor the congregation, it sends the signal to the member "no one is better than me" and to the congregation that the pastor shows favoritism.

We will never, once again, get around the word sustainability. Passing the mantel is biblical, changing of the guard or whatever term we choose. It is never wise for a member to be allowed to hold a lifetime position, the Lord did not permit leaders to hold lifetime positions, and neither should the church. God never showed respect of persons; and we are to follow in God's footsteps. If the member has a problem with it; they are

carnal. Having a time of term is the way I think of it, these things should be put in place when the persons are appointed the position. Not even the pastor serves for a lifetime.

This subject could be discussed all day because many members have problems when they are asked to step down and allow someone else to serve. This also goes back to reproducing. These actions will hurt the church by allowing Grandma Betty to continue to be the church administrator when nothing is in order when the books are audited. Just because she has served in that position for fifty years, we allow the church to suffer, because we do not want to offend the family.

One Day Intensive Session: Chapter Six - From Tipping to Tithing

Paul said that the times that we should be on meat we are on milk; this would fit the Christians that know about tithing and still desire to tip God on Sundays. This subject is the heartbeat of the church, no money, no church! The easiest part about preaching and teaching this subject is they are already familiar with it. The old members may not attend regularly because of it and the new ones will not come back because of it. Yet, the subject of tithing is to be preached and taught.

There are many messages that a pastor can preach about money and for everyone there will be complainers. The question is sometimes asked from members, “do we tithe from the gross or the net?” I in return ask, “Do you want your blessing from God to come from the gross or the net?” The humorous pastor can preach it with humor, the serious pastor can preach it from a serious standpoint. The angry pastor can preach it with anger, but the bottom line is, it has to be preached and maybe with the same response.

There are those members that have experienced a few things in life and know the importance of tithing. There are those that have never struggled with giving God ten percent of what belongs to God already. Then, there are those that give willingly, the tithe and beyond, because they realize that they cannot beat God's giving. Therefore, surveys are helpful with the church because they become a great measuring stick if they question and or have a variety of questions.

This allows the pastor and his team to know the areas that the members struggle with and need the most help. It does not require a name; but the numbers are very helpful in a positive way. The congregation sees it as a helpful concern because it is done as often as needed. The pastor uses it as ministry growth. In a workplace, faithful Christians talk about the church that they attend. In this life everyone wants to be a part of an engaging conversation. My goal as a pastor is to plan to make sure that Simon Temple is a part of those conversations in a positive spiritual way. Not just sustainability but reaching those that have not been reached and even those that need a second spiritual touch. Tithing and not tipping because we owe a debt that we will never repay!

As we moved through the session the participants had many questions. They wanted to know if there was some resistance from the church: how did you handle the needs and concerns of persons who have been attending the church for years, concerns about losing the traditions of the church, and what did you do if members did not support your ideas. Those were all legitimate questions. I shared with them that I had those questions as well. I replied by indicating that I always made sure I sought God before making a decision about anything. I took things to my board, shared data with them and explained why things needed to happen. I made sure I made incremental changes and I

had the resources to back my decisions. I could see as I shared strategies with them their apprehension began to decrease; and they engaged more with me throughout the conversation.

After the session was over, I distributed the post-survey to the participants. Again, I left the room in order to maintain credibility and the validity of the research. Those surveys were placed in a separate envelope and marked post. I took the information home; and within two days after the session I dissected the data.

One Day Intensive Session Findings

The pre-survey consisted of ten narrative statements designed to gather data about participants' thoughts on obstacles that will hinder church growth. Eighteen of the twenty-one participants responded to the survey. Upon examining the data, I searched for patterns that would yield responses that would give me some insight into the participants' thoughts on church growth obstacles. I searched to see if any responses stood out over the others and yielded such a high response that I could clearly identify the participants' thoughts on a particular response. Table 1 shows the responses of the eighteen participants and how many people responded in each category. Figure 1 gives a distinct picture of each response in graph format. The largest response around 85%, "I believe the pastor should deal directly with obstacles or adversity." They responded with Agree.

On the opposite end of the continuum is the less than 10% responded to the statement, about daily devotion being a part of their pastoral life. This response was interesting because during the sessions, conversations with the participants talked about the importance of having a daily devotion from God so that they may hear from God; yet,

mixed responses outweighed strongly agree. During my teaching sessions, the participants' discussions with me and among their peers gave me a false perception that they understood how paramount devotion with God is to overcoming obstacles in our personal lives just as well in our pastoral ministries. The response that surprised me the most was to the statement: "I believe that pastors should deal directly with obstacles and adversities." Slightly agree was the highest response. I was concerned because as I shared in my introductions of the project, I expressed the most powerful lesson I learned is that we must confront our obstacles. A response of slightly agree indicates that people are not sure about how to handle conflict; or their dealing with obstacles directly depends on what the obstacle is, who is involved and what is the best way to resolve the matter. Overall, the data reveals that there is a need to understand the origins of obstacles, the impact this work will have on my understanding of obstacles and how obstacles can be a hindrance to church growth. Not having any resounding responses in the strongly disagree area gives me hope that my teaching will have some impact on bringing an awareness to obstacles that prevent church growth.

Table 1. Pre-survey results for pastors 1-18*

Narrative Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I believe that daily devotion is key to the pastoral life.	2	1	4	2	1	8
I believe that church growth should be a part of the pastor's vision.	1		4	3	3	7
I believe that fellowship with other pastors is beneficial.	2	2	2	6	2	4

I believe that the pastor should deal directly with obstacles or adversity.	1	2		7	2	6
Narrative Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I believe that obstacles are ordained of God for spiritual growth.	2		1	4	4	7
I believe that an obstacle can become a hindrance to church growth.	2	2	3	3	4	4
I believe that prayer alone is the key to overcoming an obstacle.		3	3	3	5	4
I believe that what works for one church could very well work for another.		3	4	3	5	3
I believe that the obstacles from my church have greatly increased my faith.	2	3	3	3	2	5
I believe that God will use this project to help me to grow my church.		3	4	2	6	3

*Each number represents the responses per pastor for each survey statement. Each statement has a total of eighteen responses, accounting for the number of pastors surveyed.

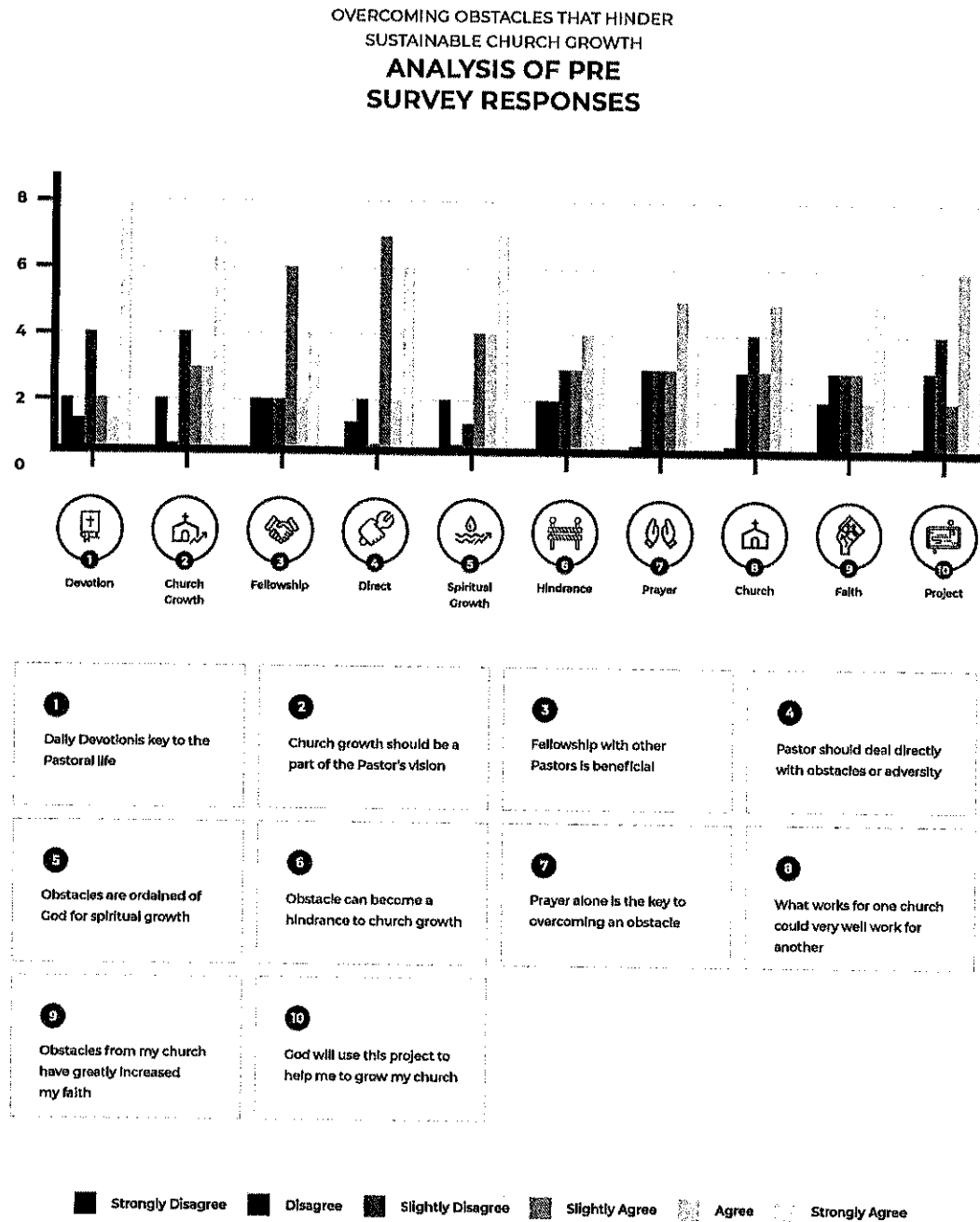


Figure 1. Analysis of pre-survey responses

After reviewing the post survey data, I quickly saw a difference from the response from the pre-survey. The results from the post survey (Figure 2), indicated the response

to the statement, "I believe daily devotional is key to the pastoral life." I was pleased with this response because in sharing my teachings I needed them to know the significance of seeking God through having a quiet time. Knowing the importance of hearing from God particularly on removing obstacles is paramount to church growth. As a result of the responses to the survey and the reaction to the sessions, three pastors were selected to participate in the case study. One of the pastors from the eighteen participated in the case study. The purpose of the case study was to either corroborate or refute what was learned from the study.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES THAT HINDER
SUSTAINABLE CHURCH GROWTH
**POST SURVEY ANALYSIS OF
SURVEY RESPONSES**

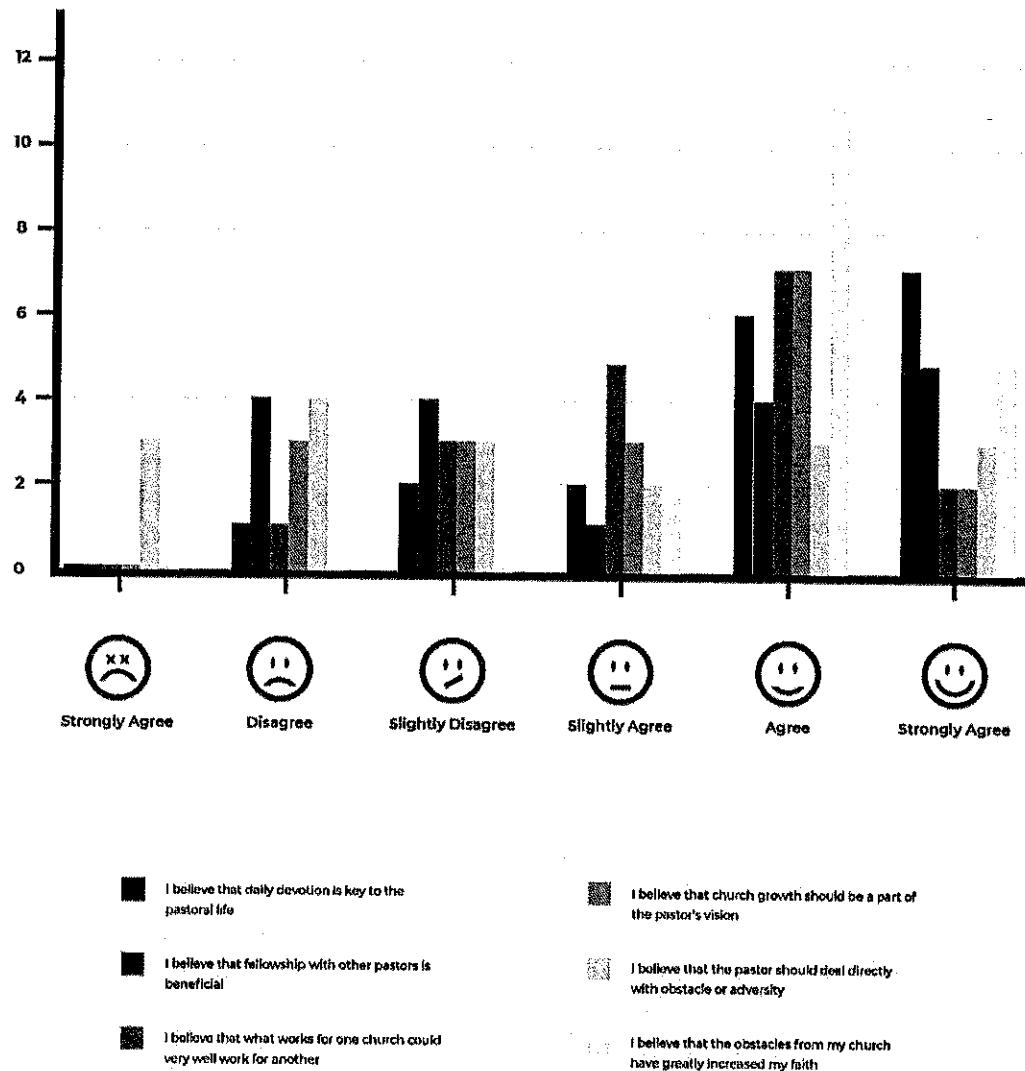


Figure 2. Analysis of post-survey responses

Six Focus Sessions

Session One was a pre-project luncheon, which was the orientation stage of the project, it was held on October 20, 2019 at Simon Temple AME Zion Church. As part of the orientation, we shared in a time of introductions and fellowship and talked in general about the struggles of ministry. Much of the responses about struggle was about how they see the church as declining and the difficulties of trying to grow a church during times that seem to be difficult to accomplish such task. I was careful not to engage too deeply into the topic because I did not want to sway anyone's response or compromise the study. At this luncheon, I formally thanked the participants for agreeing to share in the project and explained the project process. After discussing, answering any questions about the Human Research Agreement each participant's signature was obtained. After obtaining participants' signatures, the pre-survey form was distributed (Appendix C). After dispensing the survey, I answered any questions regarding the survey, and asked that it be returned at our next session. We set the date for our next session and ended the luncheon with prayer.

Session two was the introduction to the first and second teachings on the obstacles that hinder church growth. These teachings addressed how traditions can present itself as an obstacle and moving from church mentality to spirituality. At this session participants returned their pre-survey. This session was held on November 2, 2019, at Simon Temple A.M.E. Zion Church. After restating the project process, I presented the biblical foundation for the project. The biblical foundation was from Genesis 37:23-36 and Romans 8:18-39. These two scriptural texts were chosen because both speak to themes of transformation and overcoming. From the Genesis passage, we discussed how and why

Joseph found himself in the pit and how he overcame his situation to get out of the pit and fulfilled his purpose.

The story of Joseph in the pit is one of overcoming obstacles. These are obstacles of jealousy, envy, deceit, abandonment and false imprisonment. At every turn Joseph, his father and his brothers had to overcome some aspect of the choices that they made themselves or that were made for them. Not only did Joseph overcome those personal obstacles placed before him, but he was also a divine conduit on behalf of his family. The Romans passage speaks to establishing a relationship with God and the power of faith. Paul declared many will be tried, but the glory that will be revealed by God is the glory that believers should be concerned with. Paul speaks to the concept of freedom, which was extremely important during the days when he was in Rome. The Romans were notorious for enslaving others, occupying their lands, and holding captives. Those subjected to Roman rule and persecution desired freedom from high taxes, religious persecution, and bondage. Paul is saying to them, although you struggle there is a better way. Paul is exposing them to the concept of transformation.

After the discussion on church growth obstacles, the surveys were collected from the participants. The surveys were immediately dissected for the participants' responses about their thoughts on church growth.

The case study participants responded to the seven narrative statements on the pre-survey. On four of the statements, the case study participants all marked strongly agree on their responses. The responses to the other three statements were as follows: "I believe that what works for one church could very well for another." One participant strongly disagrees and the other two slightly disagree. As we engaged in conversation

during the session the participants revealed that it could not be a one size fits all because the resources dictate the delineation. In addition to resources, it also depends on the congregation and the relationship between the pastor and the congregants. As a pastor who has studied these practices and implemented them, I would have to agree with them on this statement. It is a matter of resources and commitment from your congregation and staff to walk this road with you.

“I believe that fellowship with other pastors is beneficial,” was the one statement where the three participants’ response was agree or strongly agree. It is necessary to build a relationship with other pastors because it helps to build your capacity, have a sounding board and it helps build community with persons in like context. No one can speak to your experiences or understand your experiences unless they have experienced what you have experienced; thus, validating my work. To the statement, “I believe that church growth should be a part of the pastor’s vision,” the participants responded slightly agree and strongly agree. I must admit that I was surprised at this response. I was particularly surprised considering the context of which we preach. As pastors, we preach and teach people about the importance of having a vision. So, my concern was that they must have had some thoughts of church growth or they would not have agreed to the study. When I mentioned this to the participants, one stated, “I am curious about the work and if I decide to move forward then it will become a part of my vision.” I respect that response. We closed the session with directives for the next session and prayer.

See Figures 3, 4, and 5 below:

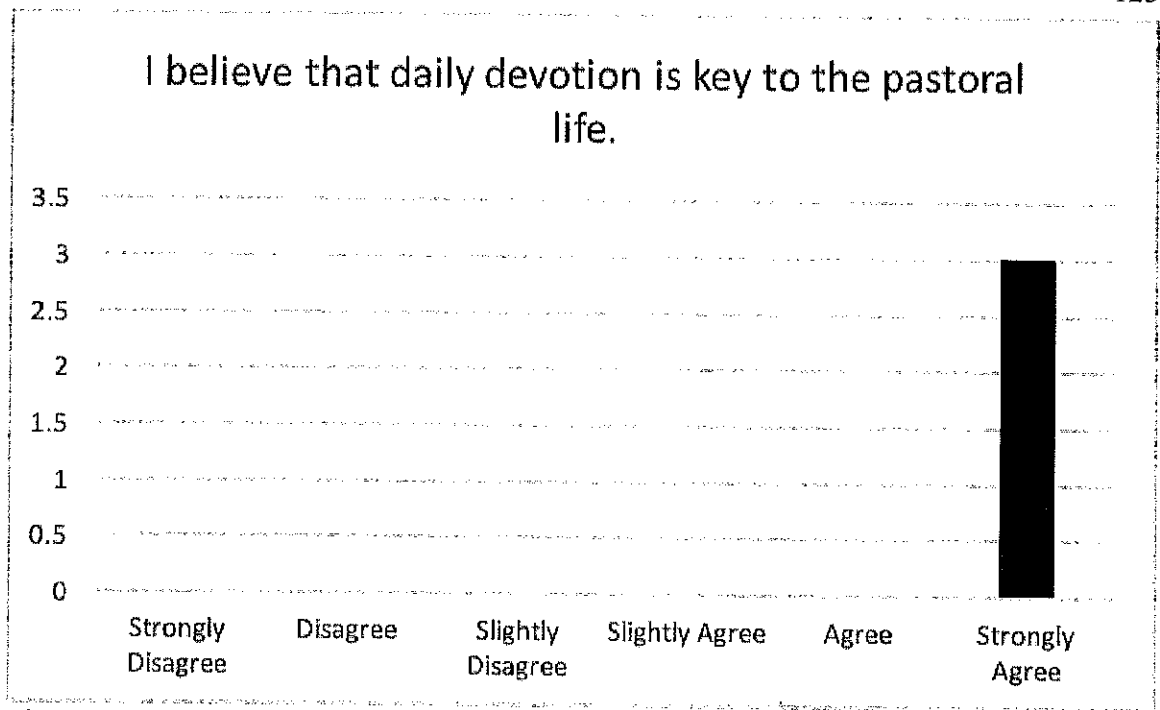


Figure 3. Case study participants' responses to pre-survey question #1

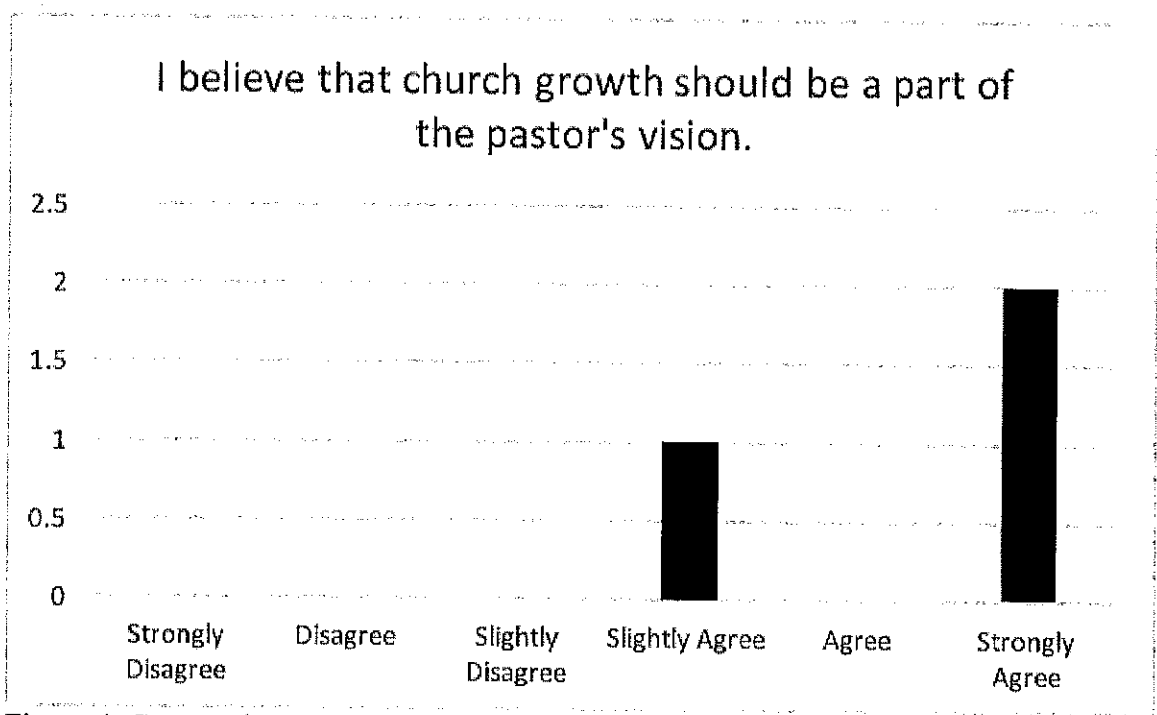


Figure 4. Case study participants' responses to pre-survey question #2

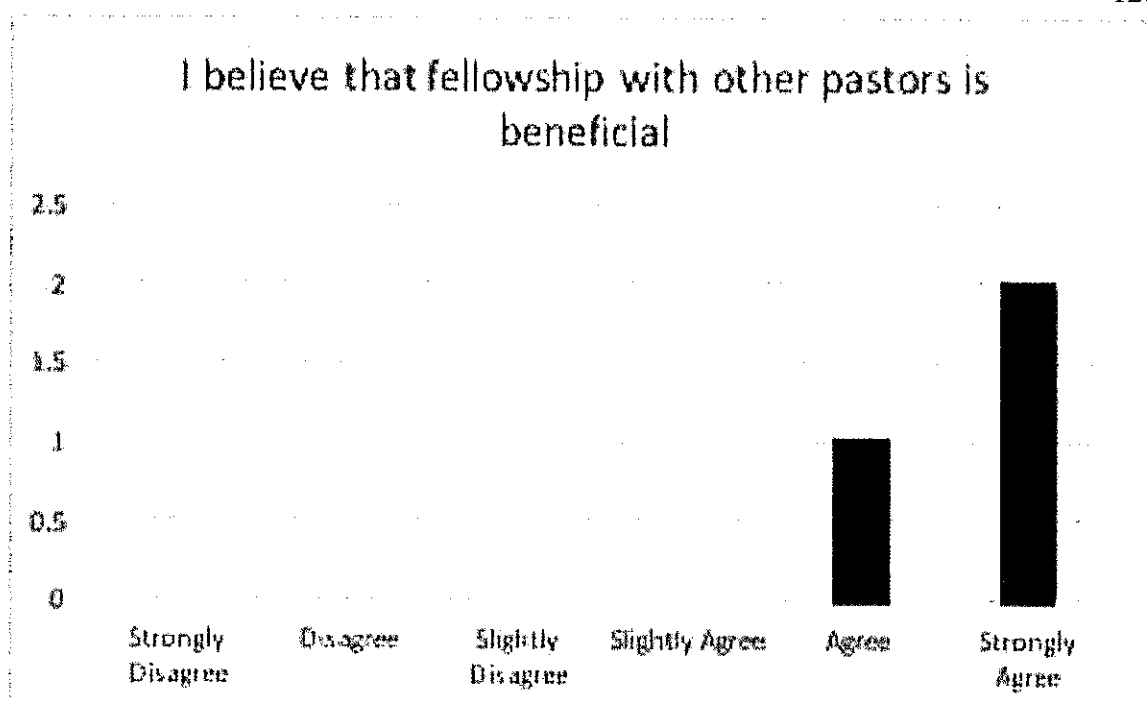


Figure 5. Case study participants' responses to pre-survey question #3

Session three was held on December 16, 2019 via conference call with the three focus group participants. In this session participants discussed the biblical principles of church growth. During this session, participants also shared concerns they had about the location of the church, Bible study, teaching and preaching. Briefly, as it relates to church location, it is simply a matter of access to resources. Resources that will assist with offering programs to meet the needs of and support the church. We all agreed that location supersedes the needs of the people.

Bible study, preaching and teaching has an impact on church growth that could allow the pendulum to swing both ways. As it relates to Bible study, three points seemed to resonate in each participant's response: (a) Bible study as a follow-up to the sermon or sermons, (b) an opportunity for interested members to become acquainted with the church, and (c) as an opportunity for people to connect. Ronald V. Friend, quotes in his article, "The Bible and Church Planting/Church Growth," a statement by Phillip Jenkins,

which says, “The church appears to be growing most rapidly in places where the bible is taken literally.”¹³ He further states, “Where the Bible is taken literally, it is read, understood and lived by ordinary people.”¹⁴ In addition, Isaiah 55:11 says this, “So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; It shall not return to Me void, But it shall accomplish what I please, And it shall prosper *in the thing* for which I sent it.”

Bible study, for each participant, is offered as a mid-week refueling service. For the large church, it is offered a particular day of the week at noon and at 7:00 p.m. in the evening. While this service attendance is not reflective of the larger congregation, it is consistently attended. It is an opportunity for congregants to participate in a reciprocal teaching discussion method that delves into the scriptures that are taught. The participants noted that Bible study is an avenue to follow-up on the message that has been taught which offers members the opportunity to get a better understanding of how to live a life of faith according to the Bible. I believe the aforementioned statements are congruent to what I have found to be true during my efforts of church growth. I found that people would attend Bible study several times before they fully commit to the church. Friend stated, “Bible study is an example “the small group venue is for seekers.”¹⁵ The regular and consistent offering of Bible study affords people the opportunity to connect and build relationships.

The impact of preaching and teaching on church growth is equally impactful as Bible study. According to Earl V. Comfort, “at the heart of growth is an effective pulpit

¹³ Ronald V. Friend, “The Bible and Church Planting/Church Growth,” Lausanne World Pulse Archives, accessed March 8, 2020, <https://www.lausanneworldpulse.com/themedarticles-php/601/01-2007>.

¹⁴ Friend, “The Bible and Church Planting,” accessed March 8, 2020, <https://www.lausanneworldpulse.com/themedarticles-php/601/01-2007>.

¹⁵ Friend, “The Bible and Church Planting,” accessed March 8, 2020, <https://www.lausanneworldpulse.com/themedarticles-php/601/01-2007>.

ministry.”¹⁶ In other words, preaching makes the difference in persons attending church. People are looking for messages that are Christ-centered; it identifies with where they are today and has life application. Each participant, regardless of church size found this to be one of the most challenging aspects of church growth. It was viewed as challenging because with the increase of social media outlets used for preaching and for preaching being dubbed today as “preaching for entertaining.” Frank J. Retief states, “It is true that the pulpit can become a stage where the preacher puts on a performance.”¹⁷ Moreover, further discussion yielded the importance of sermon preparation. One participant mentioned that people are looking for a particular style of preaching. People are often not looking for authentic delivery but for how much a person can hoop and make particular gestures throughout the sermon. They agreed that nothing is wrong with that, but it should not be used as a measurement of a preacher’s effectiveness.

Sermon preparation for all of them requires having a disciplined prayer life and daily study of the word. These actions align with the comments on the pre-survey about daily devotion. This is important because they want to ensure they are presenting messages that are Christ-centered and relevant to their congregations. Darrell W. Johnson stresses the need to spend time studying the Bible. He says, “There is no doubt that the degree to which the preacher has been and is being affected by the text plays a role in the effectiveness of the sermon. There is no doubt that the degree of the preacher’s

¹⁶ Earl V. Comfort, “Is the Pulpit a Factor in Church Growth?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 140, no. 557 (1994): 133.

¹⁷ Frank J. Retief, “Preaching That Grows the Church,” *When God’s Voice is Heard: The Power of Preaching* (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 125.

faithfulness to the text plays a role in the effectiveness of the sermon.”¹⁸ The participants found people enjoy preaching and teaching that captures their attention at the onset of the sermon. They enjoyed messages that make continuous reference to the text throughout the sermon. In addition, the relevancy of the sermon about what is going on in the lives of the people today was of importance.

Dudley and Cummins noted, “proclaiming the gospel, winning and baptizing converts, incorporating them into responsible membership, nurturing their spiritual development, equipping them for further service, motivating them to missionary tasks, and supporting them as they go out to exercise their gifts to bring in still others.”¹⁹ All agreed that what they say and do from the pulpit impacts their membership because people weigh heavily on the words and teachings of the pastor.

The discussion during the fourth session held on January 13, 2020 via conference call centered around the concern with numbers, the number of persons in attendance, the number of persons on the roll, the number of persons you want to be in attendance (the number you are trying to achieve). Are numbers important? In the estimation of participants, yes numbers are important. In the discussion, participants talked about how the world decides which functions it will attend – club, dance, restaurant, and or mall. The world looks to those places where the most people are, and they gravitate to those places. After all, if people are there, they are there for a reason and they want to know the reason. Something is attracting them, and they want to share in that attraction.

¹⁸ Darrell W. Johnson, *The Glory of Preaching: Participating in God's Transformation of the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 31.

¹⁹ Roger L. Dudley and Des Cummings Jr., *Adventures in Church Growth* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1985), 34.

I noticed as the participants delved more into the discussion about places that have high participation and why people gravitate to those places, an awareness was being created or validated about attraction. The rich discussion led to more questions. For example, what do you do when you have a 400-seat capacity facility and only fifty people are present? These fifty people are scattered across the sanctuary creating an atmosphere of separation and individuality. In order to create a corporate atmosphere, the people must be brought together. Therefore, to further enhance this discussion and bring the project to life I asked the participants to take part in an exercise in their own context. As an exercise, each participant was asked to rope off areas of their sanctuary creating a more intimate seating arrangement for congregants. This was to be carried out over a three-week period. On week one, the concept was introduced. Week two it was implemented, and week three congregants shared their responses to the concept. The Acts chapter two scripture was used as the biblical basis.

We also discussed the fact that there are a number of persons listed on church rolls who are not actively involved. They neither attend the Sunday worship experience nor are they engaged in any ministry activities. I shared with the participants a letter of reconciliation used at Simon Temple in an effort to engage the membership into active ministry participation. Participants were free to use the letter and information at their discretion to assist in contacting their membership. Each of the participants reported using the letter at their local church.

During the fifth session, January 30, 2020, held via conference call, participants completed the pastoral questionnaire (Appendix A) and discussed how they applied the biblical principles for church growth shared in session four to their personal situations.

The conclusion was that we are all in the same boat. Nine out of ten churches are struggling with church growth and how to sustain that growth. Each church is facing some obstacle that hinders growth. The three major areas of concern were: a changing culture, lack of commitment, and resources. In looking at the three major areas of concern, the large church did not struggle with resources or a changing culture; but it did struggle with lack of commitment. The medium and small churches struggled with all three. As an exercise, each participant was asked to contact the pastor or leading administrator of five additional churches. They were to know or identify with three of the churches and be familiar with the other two. In making the contact, the participants were expected to ask how they would describe their church with regard to church growth, as struggling or thriving. The results were expected to be shared at the next session.

In the sixth and final session, February 7, 2020, held at Simon Temple A.M.E. Zion Church, participants discussed demographics and more direct questions about the ministry. The discussion covered the geographic location, culture of the population as well as socioeconomics. During the discussion, participants completed the ministry questionnaire (Appendix B) and shared their worship style and content and the various ministries offered at their local churches. The ministry questionnaire included the following questions:

1. Do you have a new members committee, but concentrate on walking new members through the process of membership until they are assigned a small group leader?
2. Do you have a small group system that will be there to assist members with membership?

3. Do you intentionally have a ministry to make disciples (i.e. a ministry that goes beyond asking people to be saved of their sins but shows and guides them through living a saved life through Jesus Christ – developing a relationship with Christ, becoming more like Christ)?
4. Do you have at least fifteen active ministries to address the spiritual needs of all members?
5. Are the ministries that are targeted for millennials, singles and seniors along with any other week that is dominant with your church on Sunday morning?
6. Does your ministry have a social media presence to include streaming and also the deployment of pre-recorded services that may be sent to all persons that desire to receive the word?
7. What is it that your ministry does well and what have you done to capitalize on that to make your ministry more attractive and make you different from other ministries?
8. Do you have a spiritual gifts assessment and spiritual gifts coordinators to maximize the gifts of those the congregation so they will feel connected after they join the church and become an invested member of your congregation?

The responses to the questions varied; however, three questions yielded responses which revealed that the respondents were already aware that these were obstacles to church growth.

The question, “Do you have a new members committee, but concentrate on walking new members through the process of membership until they are assigned a small group leader?” Each of the participants has some form of new members training or

orientation. The training or orientation is offered over four to eight session at the church. One of the participants has a formal completion celebration where existing membership can celebrate and welcome the as new members. The responses to this question are indicative to my teaching on traditionalism. Traditionally, new members' classes might have been held later in the week or nothing was offered at all. I shared with them the importance of assimilating members into your church because so many people come from so many denominations and practices are different. When people are not aware of the culture and expectations of the denomination for many of them it is a turn off thus leading to a decrease in numbers. So, I commended them on their creative efforts to extend opportunities for members to join.

The question, "Do you intentionally have a ministry to make disciples (i.e. A ministry that goes beyond asking people to be saved of their sins but shows and guides them through living a saved life through Jesus Christ – developing a relationship with Christ, becoming more like Christ?)" All three respondents answered, "Yes." They expressed the importance of discipleship to Christian growth and living the Christian life. These responses I felt were important and aligned to my teachings on "moving from membership to discipleship." The responses indicated a move in the direction that the participants understood the significance for change and that church growth is not going to just happen. Throughout the study, I saw the confidence building in the participants and they wanted to learn new strategies and techniques to grow members beyond the things they were already doing.

The question. "Do you have a spiritual gifts assessment and spiritual gifts coordinator to maximize the gifts of those the congregation so they will feel connected

after they join the church and become an invested member of your congregation?” None of the respondents has a spiritual gifts assessment nor coordinator. So, I introduced the concept of spiritual gift assessment to the participants and it was truly a moment of enlightenment.

The final question, I would like to point out because it is important to me to maintain the positivity that we had built in the previous sessions and to encourage them so they will continue the work. I feel this question will be important to future work because, as I learned in my work with church growth; it was important along the way to examine the metrics of what had already been completed. I realized through my process that I was so focused on movement that often I did not pay enough attention to the things that were working well and were solid in their sustainability. So, I asked this question, “What is it that your ministry does well and what have you done to capitalize on that to make your ministry more attractive and make you different from other ministries?” Each respondent shared at least one ministry activity that they felt they were doing well. Each of the activities involved outreach beyond the immediate congregation and involved some congregational and or leadership involvement, thus making the church visible in the community.

Many lessons were learned from this session. The exchange revealed that pastors may not be able to change the culture, but they can introduce a new context. The worship and preaching must connect to the lives of the people. They must speak to the needs of the people right where they are. As important as worship and preaching are, ministries are equally if not more important. Ministries are important because they connect the church to the community. Ministries must be stronger than the Sunday worship service because

ministries reach beyond the Sunday morning experience. Ministries keep congregants connected by forming bonds.

Participants also shared the results of the controlled environment exercise. Though there was some level of rejection to the idea, once an explanation was offered congregants were more receptive and willingly participated in the exercise. Each participant indicated that they would continue use of the controlled environment strategy. Results of the contact with five additional churches showed that four of every five churches described themselves as struggling with church growth. Twenty additional churches were contacted. Prior to leaving, the participants were given a post-survey to complete. The responses were collected and placed in an envelope marked post-survey.

The results of the post survey indicated that there was no change to the survey responses (Figure 6) but the most growth was evident during the discussions and the work the pastors took back to their churches. My indicator of change is the request the pastors have asked for further conversation beyond the sessions. For example, participants' responses, "No, I plan to start small groups as a result of this study." "No, my church does not have fifteen ministries, but I am going to begin to focus more in this area as to help produce greater church growth." "We are now enrolling members for leadership training as to prepare for ministry growth." "I wish more sessions like these were offered to all pastors and that would include seasoned pastors as well. We are all ever learning and none of us have arrived."

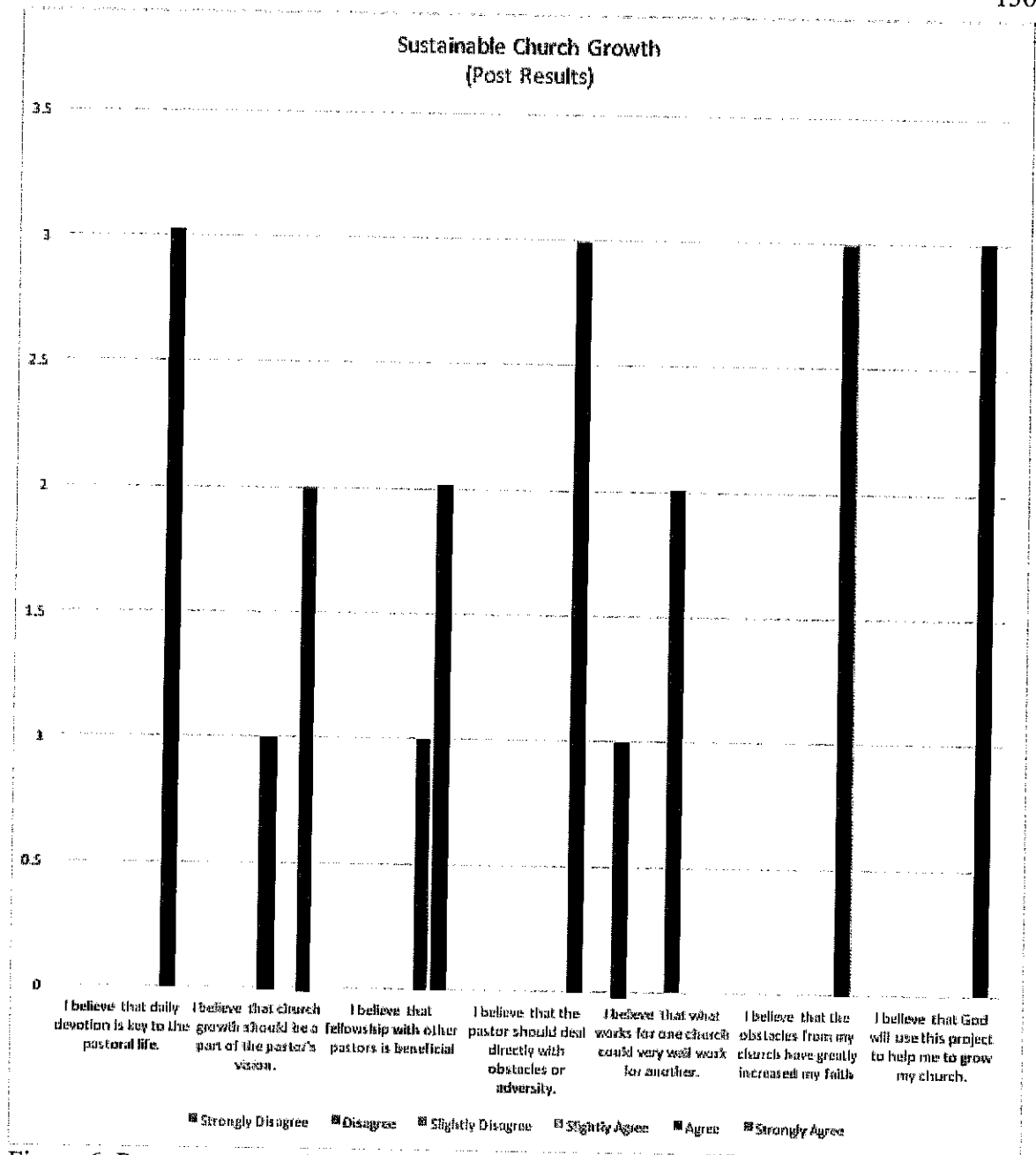


Figure 6. Post-survey results

Summary of Learning

What has been learned from this project is covered in the summary of learning. It will discuss ways that the hypothesis was supported or negated. The purpose of this study was to help pastors recognize and how to overcome obstacles that hinder church growth.

Information provided to participants had to be relevant, and applicable in order to meet the needs of the participants. The participants attended sessions that would provide the opportunities to interact with me and other pastors thus creating avenues for networking and for building further community among the participants. The participants completed pre and post-surveys that provided insight about their thoughts on the topic; and it also revealed participants change over time. This change over time occurred and was evident via survey for the eighteen participants who attended the four-hour session; and for the case study participants as the sessions evolved and they tried some of the practices back at their own settings.

At the inception of this study the participants were on different ends of the spectrum as it relates to church growth. The eighteen participants on the Fayetteville area initiated the furtherance of the project out of their frustrations concerning church growth. As a result of the four-hour session, I saw a need to further the conversations and data collection by conducting the case study. Throughout the work of this research participants shared how they were “grateful” for this study because it stirred up some questions in them and invoked them to become cognizant of obstacles and how they can implement the teachings from this study to sustain church growth. I learned that regardless of your church denominations or demographic backgrounds the experience with church growth knows no boundaries. I understand, as well as the participants, the value of traditionalism and how not moving strategically as it concerns this matter can be detrimental. Traditionalism is a removable obstacle. I am encouraged by the work the case study participants took back to churches throughout the community indicates there is a need for this work. The project met its goal concerning bringing an awareness to the

participants in the study of obstacles that hinder church growth. Based on the data collected from the surveys, during the case study sessions and from the conference discussions that awareness has been created and the participants have learned strategies that will help them recognize obstacles that prevent them from sustaining growth.

Conclusion

The project was successful in identifying ways to recognize those obstacles that hinder church growth as well as offered suggestions for maintaining sustainable church growth. During the project ministers and pastors (from different denominations) were taught and gained knowledge of principles that will help them overcome obstacles that hinder church; and if implemented, will help sustain that growth. Finally, the project birthed a new network of information exchange and professional and social contacts for the participants, enabling them to share with one another and other pastors and ministers what they gained as a result of participating in this project.

APPENDIX A
PASTORAL QUESTIONNAIRE

Project Title: Overcoming Obstacles That Hinder Sustainable Church Growth
Pastoral Questionnaire

Name: _____

Name of Church: _____

How many years of pastoring?

How many years at present church?

Name of former church/churches (optional):

Please list one reason why you were open to help with this study:

What are you praying to gain by helping with this project?

What would you say was your most recent obstacle that you faced in the ministry?

Do you feel that it was dealt with in the manner that the Lord intended? If no, explain.

What is your strength or weakness in the matter of church growth?

When faced with an obstacle how do you feel as the pastor?

If you had to give an area of church growth that you need the most help with, what area would you choose?

How may I personally and confidentially pray for you?

Thank you for your help with this study, I know that your time is most valuable. I greatly appreciate what you have gone through to make yourself available. Please know that as a fellow pastor, I partner with you in Kingdom Building and above all in prayer. Thank you once again!

APPENDIX B
MINISTRY QUESTIONNAIRE

Project Title: Overcoming Obstacles That Hinder Sustainable Church Growth**Ministry Questionnaire**

Name: _____

Name of Church: _____

Briefly, what do you feel it takes to grow a church outside of people?

Name 3 ministries that you are concerned with seeing grow.

What method have you as the pastor used to grow these ministries?

List a few of your strongest ministry leaders:

List a few members that you feel spiritually mirror the above names:

Compare the 2 lists, have you already implemented a mentoring group where this transformation can take place?

Yes No

If no, explain briefly why not.

Do you see this as an instant place of church growth? Fruit, bear fruit!

Will you please finish this prayer request in regard to the names that you listed that the Lord will show you how to make this work for your church?

Dear God, I know that you lead me to be a part of this project here is my prayer to you.....

*Thank you for your help with this questionnaire, please know that I am praying for you and your ministry. The Lord has a plan for all of us to greater develop our vineyard, you have my prayer support.

APPENDIX C
PRE-SURVEY

—

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES THAT HINDER SUSTAINABLE CHURCH GROWTH

SURVEY

Please take time to complete this pre-survey. In accordance with your consent form, your identity will be kept private and confidential. Your name is not required on this survey, your responses are greatly appreciated. During this project we will discuss the title and expand upon methods of sustainable church growth by overcoming obstacles. Your time is very much appreciated, and our prayer is that many things will be learned from this project. We will have open class discussion as to give each pastor an opportunity to share his/her ideas. This area is vital to Kingdom Building as we know that this is the Lord's desire that our churches reproduce ourselves as Christians and build greater ministries.

Thank you for your participation!

Age:

Gender:

Please put a check in the box that best corresponds with your statement.

Narrative Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I believe that daily devotion is key to the pastoral life.						
I believe that church growth should be a part of the pastor's vision.						
I believe that fellowship with other pastors is beneficial.						
I believe that the pastor should deal directly with obstacles or adversity.						

Narrative Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I believe that obstacles are ordained of God for spiritual growth.						
I believe that an obstacle can become a hindrance to church growth.						
I believe that prayer alone is the key to overcoming an obstacle.						
I believe that what works for one church could very well work for another.						
I believe that the obstacles from my church have greatly increased my faith.						
I believe that God will use this project to help me to grow my church.						

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